

Now I'm a

DEMON LORD!

Happily Ever After with

Monster Girls!

in My **DUNGEON**

3

Author: Ryuyu

Illustrator: Daburyu





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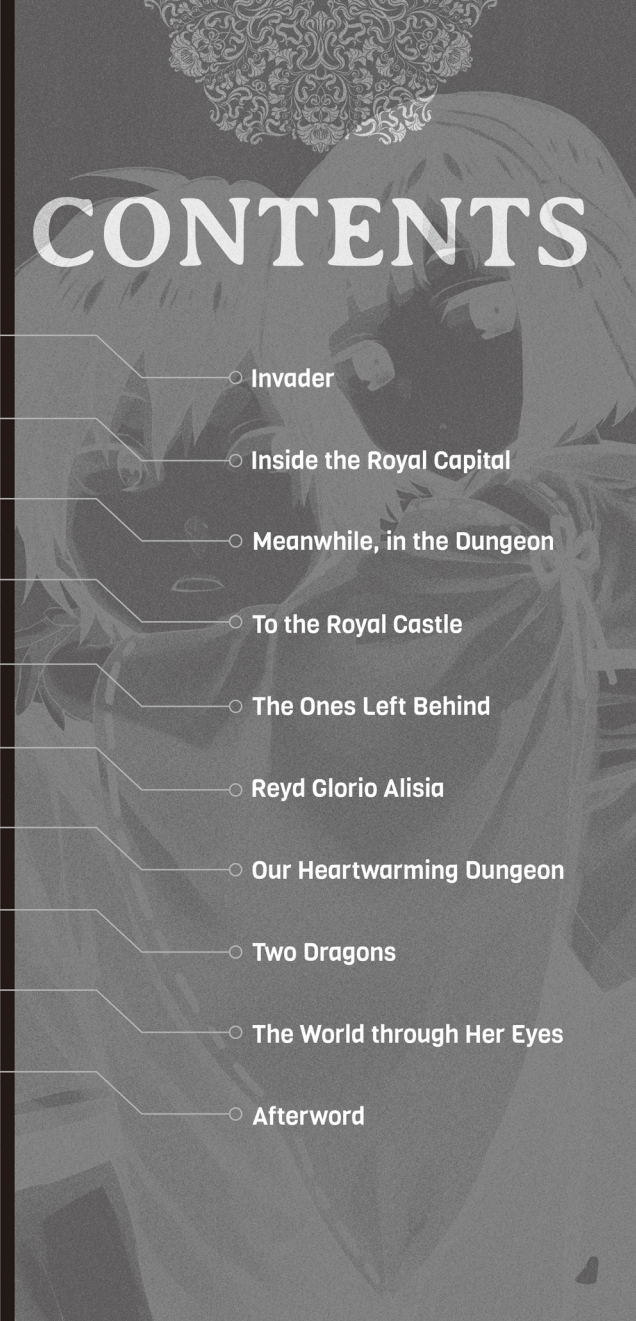
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Prologue: Invader

Yuki here. I'm the guy who was reborn as a demon lord in another world. I couldn't tell you how, exactly, but one way or another, I'd managed to trick Nell, the hero who'd initially come to attack my dungeon, into becoming an ally. She'd told me everything she knew about the son of a bitch who'd been messing with my life by sending those soldiers and her, and then I'd set out for the royal capital where he was supposed to be. I'd run into a slight issue, though.

"Mr. Yuki! You could stand to treat me a little more carefully, you know!"

Right now, that hero was pissed at me.

"L-Look, that's my bad, okay? B-But it's not like I didn't give you a heads-up before I flew off."

"'Keep your voice down or we'll get found out,' was it?! Should I have been able to read your mind from just that?!"

All right, all right, I'm sorry. You got me. It was one hundred percent a premeditated crime on my part. With Stealth active, I'd busted out my wings and blasted off into the sky, the plan being to invade the royal capital by air. The superfast takeoff and equally sudden landing had apparently scared the living crap out of her. *Forgive me, will ya?*

"L-Let's talk about this later, okay? I-I think the guards are after us."

The hero had gotten all up in my face, which had me bending way back to avoid her wrath. I wanted out of this sticky situation, hence the pointing behind her and telling her about the incoming guards. They'd definitely heard her screaming while we'd been airborne. Meanwhile, I'd been scoping out the city from above to add info to my Maps feature. Good thing I had, because now, it was going nuts with the hostile presence warnings. I could even hear the clanking of their armor as they made their way toward us.

Speaking of Maps, this new feature was something I'd activated a while ago. As long as I inspected a new location to fill in its data, Maps would show me enemies' exact locations even outside the dungeon's territory. I'd learned another thing about Maps recently too. It got geographical data and showed enemy locations by analyzing the mana that existed all around us. It was kinda like how dolphins and bats use echolocation, or how fishing boats and warships have sonar devices to detect anything in the water around them.

The feature was a Dungeon Points purchase, and I had a good idea of why Maps operated the way it did. So, my body was pretty sensitive to mana, and that was what the function relied on to work. It felt like it was legit modifying that part of me every time I used it too. Outside of the whole “demon lord instead of human” thing, I was basically a cyborg now. Maybe I needed to start wearing a black helmet with a really loud breathing apparatus.

“Tch. Whatever. This way, Mr. Yuki. Follow me.”

Um, Mr. Yuki thinks it's unladylike for girls to click their tongues.

Nell headed off, practically jogging away from me. I rubbed my chest and sighed a little, then hurried after her.

Chapter 1: Inside the Royal Capital

Our feet clacked as we walked down the stone path, the sounds echoing before getting absorbed into the atmosphere and disappearing. I couldn't hear any other sounds or see a single other person.

"It's so quiet..."

I mumbled that while keeping a close eye on my surroundings. It wasn't that late, but the path we were on and everything around us was deathly silent. Compared to that border town Lefi and I had visited as tourists—Alfiro, I think its name was?—this city was a whole lot bigger. But the lack of life and energy made it feel lonely, like some sort of ghost town.

"Not too long ago, these streets were bustling with activity... Now, though, I suspect that everyone is hiding in their houses, afraid of the dangers wrought by the recent troubles here in the capital."

"Yeah, that tracks. This is literally a matter of life and death for them."

I might've been biased since I hadn't actually seen it happen, but I wouldn't have been surprised if citizens had been arrested for bullshit reasons or even abandoned to fend for themselves. I mean, all of that was just how martial law worked, y'know? I'd been a big history buff in my previous life, so I knew what I was talking about.

Plus, I had another hint: an *insane* number of red dots on Maps. There was no way they were all soldiers, so I had to wonder who the people behind them really were. On top of that, I had sensed that something was off the minute we'd infiltrated the royal capital. Last but not least was the strong rotting—no, *decaying* smell. Put it all together and there was only one thing those red dots could be.

"I'd been informed about the state of the capital, but I wasn't prepared for how much worse it actually is in person. Oh, Mr. Yuki, I just realized. Why are you wearing that?"

"What? This mask is a disguise, duh. I *am* a demon lord, after all. As far as I'm concerned, the Church is still a hostile power, so I don't want anyone to see my face, much less remember it."

The white mask I was wearing looked a lot like a clown. Its eyes were thin lines, with a star underneath the left one and a teardrop below the right. The mouth was curled into a huge grin. When I'd

been browsing the DP Catalog looking for tools to disguise myself, I had wanted this mask the moment I'd seen it, so I'd bought it immediately and tossed it into Inventory. To be honest, though, I really couldn't see much through it. At this point, I was essentially forcing myself to keep it on. Disguise was key here, after all, so it was whatever.

Okay, yeah, that was a lie. I was still wearing it because the design was too cool not to. It was just that cool. Yes, I did need to say that twice. The aesthetic was just that important.



“I don’t think there’s any point in hiding your face. You’re sure this is going to be okay, though? It’ll be a big problem for me if they find out I brought a demon lord here...”

“We’ll be fine, so quit worrying.”

“One last thing. If they deny you entry, I want you to accept that, all right? You can’t force your way in.”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it. Just relax and let me work my magic.”

In that case, I’ll just have to make my move when the time comes. Not that it mattered too much either way. Even if they let me just walk in, I still planned on doing my own thing; there was no need for me to join the Church’s side for real. All I wanted to do was overthrow the prince and have the Church take credit for it. I didn’t care about anything else.

If you’re thinking that that meant there was no real reason for me to have come all this way, you’re wrong. I did have a reason, and that reason was information. I wanted it, and I wanted it *bad*. You could call that my true motive for coming here. Oh well, there was no point obsessing over all that now. I’d figure out the details after I saw how the Church ran its ship, so to speak.

“That doesn’t reassure me in the slightest... Hey, Mr. Yuki.”

“What’s up? Is my mask so cool that you’ve fallen madly in love with me?”

“Ugh, as if! Look, will you?”

The hero was getting pretty snippy. I guess she was comfortable enough with me now that she didn’t feel like she had to hold back anymore.

“Right. That. Already knew about it.”

She slowly unsheathed her holy sword, a grim look on her face. I turned toward what she was looking at—a corpse. It’d found out we were here and appeared out of the dark alleyway, swaying bonelessly like the dead creature it was. One look at its face made it plenty clear that its life force was long gone. Not to mention that it didn’t seem to give a rat’s ass about its guts hanging out of its torso or it missing an arm and a leg. Absolutely disgusting. I could feel my sanity level dropping just from looking at this monstrosity. Yes indeed, it was a zombie, aka an Undead.

Remember what I’d mentioned earlier about the awful stench? My secret guess had been that these guys were the source, and boy was I spot-on. Looked like the same kind of uproar that had gone down in Alfiro was happening here too. I know I’d said this place *felt* like a ghost town, but wouldn’t you know it, I couldn’t have picked a better description, what with all these ghostly freaks crawling around. Well, *undead* freaks, if you wanna get technical. You know what I meant.

Jeepers creepers, for shit that looked like it was straight out of a B-grade horror movie, being on the receiving end still sucked hard. I'd said it before and I'd say it again, I could *not* handle gore for the life of me. And no chance it was just me either. Being chased by a corpse with its organs swinging around all over the place would make anyone's stomach churn. Guaran-freaking-teed.

"There's more? We don't have time to waste on fighting them, though. Mr. Yuki, we're taking a detour."

"Roger that."

I followed Nell down a narrow lane in the royal capital.

"Yo, Nell, walking dead that way."

"Oh, you're right. Let's head down this road, then."

Once I'd told her about Maps's enemy alert, we made our way around the Undead obstacles.

"You're amazing, Mr. Yuki. You can tell where they are without even seeing them."

"Gotta make sure I don't slack off, na mean? But seriously, there's so goddamn many. Why the hell aren't the troops taking 'em out?"

This was our fourth run-in with the Undead and counting. We'd managed to get this far without having to kick any asses, but cripes, their numbers were insane. I wasn't sure how long we could keep this up.

"Hmm... If I had to guess, I'd say that either the chain of command has been disrupted, or they have explicit orders not to interfere."

"You really think they'd have orders like that? But that'd mean the higher-ups are just *letting* all these monsters run wild. In the royal freaking capital, of all places. Why would they do that? And how would that even be possible?"

"Normally, it wouldn't be, which is why I can't bring myself to believe it either. Except...nothing is normal right now. Even though the Undead have flooded the streets, we haven't seen hide nor hair of the garrison fighting them off. If anything, what's strange is the fact that security is so stringent on the city's outer walls. It's almost as if they're keeping things *in* rather than out."

She explained all that with a bleak expression.

"Gotcha. Considering what you just said, there's a good chance that these uggos are being left alone on purpose. Oh, hey, Miss Hero. Eyes forward, yeah?"

"Huh? Oh my gosh! U-Undead Away!"

When an Undead suddenly appeared in front of her, Nell instinctively thrust her hands out in front of her and chanted her spell. The minute she did, a powerful beam of light shot out from her palms,

and the Undead dropped straight to the floor.

“Was that...holy magic?”

I remembered seeing that as one of Nell’s abilities.

“Phew, what an unpleasant surprise... Yup, they teach us at the Church. I abbreviate the chant, though.”

“Does doing that change anything?”

“Yes, it makes the spell much less powerful. Ah, since this is holy magic, it might actually work really well against wicked demon lords like you, Mr. Yuki.”

“Oh nooo, I’m quaking in my boots. I’ll have to be on my best behavior or else!”

While I replied to her, I grabbed a zombie that had gotten too close for comfort by the head and smashed it against a wall. I could multitask with the best of ’em, thank you very much.

Unable to withstand a demon lord’s overwhelming strength, the Undead’s skull exploded like a pomegranate. Then, I poured a colossal amount of magic through my palm and into the corpse. Its entire body convulsed violently before it finally stopped moving.

Oh, son of a— My fingers were covered in bits of flesh, and I sure did hate the nasty, squishy sensation. I hadn’t bothered taking out my beloved Zaien from Inventory because I couldn’t swing it around too easily in this narrow alleyway. If I’d known I was gonna have to deal with this horror show, though, I would’ve at least had a short sword or dagger on hand. *This blows. I hate myself.*

“O raving abomination, I bid thee return to your final resting place. Undead Away!”

I grimaced in disgust as I wiped my hand clean. At the same time, Nell chanted her spell. She chanted the whole thing this time around, so it was a hell of a lot more efficient, clearing out the Undead ahead of us and securing a way forward. Note to self: as long as she wasn’t taken by surprise like earlier, she could actually get shit done. Seemed like a good thing to know.

“You... Even though you’re such a scaredy-cat, you’re actually okay when it comes to dealing with zom—no, the Undead, huh?”

“Sh-Shut up. Besides, I can cut the Undead. I can’t say the same for ghosts, so that’s why.”

“Wait, what? That’s your baseline for not being afraid of stuff?”

“Well, I don’t think I’m alone in that. If a sword doesn’t cut through something, that means it can’t be attacked. Although, pure magic is a viable and effective weapon against non-corporeal monsters...”

Do people in this world really think like that when it comes to what’s scary and what isn’t?

“But don’t people like you have a responsibility to exorcize

wandering souls?”

Nell was, for all intents and purposes, a part of the clergy. If she got scared stiff every time she saw a ghost like she had when she'd first shown up at my place, there was no way she'd be able to do her job properly. I guess it didn't matter, though, since I didn't actually know if wandering souls even existed. My wraith sisters didn't count because they were just ordinary monsters.

“My main role is as a preserver of the peace, so you could say phantom extermination doesn't really fall within my duties.”

“Is that right, Miss Hero? If that's God's honest truth, then I want you to look me dead in the eyes when you say it.”

The hero stubbornly refused to look at me.

After that, we'd done our best to avoid fighting, but after deciding that we couldn't do it anymore, we'd eliminated the Undead as quickly as possible. A short while later, we'd managed to make progress on our journey to the Church.

“We're here, Mr. Yuki.”

The hero stopped in front of a building that, at first glance, looked like a run-down shack. It sat in a back alley, in the middle of a row of other buildings. She didn't bat an eye as she walked up to the worn-out door and knocked on it in a rhythmic pattern. Immediately, a man's muffled voice responded from the other side.

“To the end...”

“...we weave our way.”

Slightly above the doorknob, a shutter slid open and a slot appeared. An arm reached out of it.

“Your sigil.”

Nell pulled out the seal she'd used before from inside her armor and handed it over. The man behind the door left us stewing for a few seconds before he spoke again, the confirmation procedure apparently complete.

“Thank you for your patience, exalted hero. I am glad to see that you have safely returned. I realize you must be tired from your travels, but I must request you wait while I call for someone who can verify your identity visually. This is standard protocol, so I appreciate your understanding.”

When he finished talking, I sensed him walking away. I couldn't help an astonished murmur from leaking out after seeing their exchange.

“So, hey, that was *unbelievably* badass. It was like some secret organization shit or something.”

“Mr. Yuki, I'd appreciate it if you kept thoughts like that to *yourself* moving forward.”

Apologies, ma'am. Won't happen again.

"Nell!"

At that moment, the door slammed open so hard I thought it would break, and a woman came flying through it.

"Ah! Miss Carlotta!"

The woman used her momentum to crush the hero into a tight hug, which Nell returned by wrapping her arms around the woman's waist. She looked intelligent and had a nice figure, so needless to say she was drop-dead gorgeous, but I also got the impression that she was a strong-willed, never-back-down kind of woman. She was wearing light armor designed just like the hero's, which pretty much screamed that she was associated with the Church. I saw a sword strapped to her hip too, so all signs pointed to her being another holy knight.

"I was worried about you, especially during that brief period when we didn't know your whereabouts. And after the capital went on high alert, security tightened considerably. Most of our communication methods with the outside world were severed as a result. You did well to find your way back inside."

The lady knight spoke to the hero with affection in her eyes. It made her seem like a normal woman who was talking to her little sister.

"I'm sorry. I failed to follow through with my directive."

"Don't worry. It was a reckless order to begin with, one forced upon us by the higher-ups. What matters most to me is that you're safe, Nell."

Her directive? Ohhh, her mission to take me out. I really, *really* wanted to tell this woman about how her precious hero had bawled her eyes out because of the wraith sisters' pranks, then relaxed in my hot spring before going on her merry way.

"Um, so, I'd like to introduce you to someone, Miss Carlotta."

"To this man?"

At Nell's urging, the lady knight finally noticed that I was here too. She untangled her arms from around the hero and stared me down without so much as a hint of the warmth that had just been on her face. Instead, she looked super on guard.

Okay, so, a stupid thought crossed my mind. Whenever the topic of lady knights came up, I'd been conditioned to think of the clichéd "Gah! Just kill me!" thing they'd say in, uh, certain *risqué* games and other stuff like that on Earth. Had my degenerate mind permanently ruined the phrase "lady knight" for me? Yeah, probably.

"He... He's my s-servant. Fate brought us together some time ago and we've kept each other company ever since. He's very trustworthy and capable, so I thought he'd be useful in this situation, hence I

brought him along with me...”

“Hello. I’m her servant, Wye.”

I turned to the lady knight and raised a hand in greeting.

“Are you sure we can trust him? He’s wearing quite the strange mask.”

“Th-That’s true, but I swear he’s not a bad person.”

If you have a problem with my ultra-cool mask, management would sure love to hear about it.

“Well, if he’s in your employ, Nell, I’ll take your word for it.

Frankly, we’re extremely busy right now, so extra hands would be a godsend. We welcome his skills should they truly be up to snuff.

Come, let’s go inside before we’re assailed by the Undead.”

The light-armored lady knight—the woman Nell called Carlotta—invited us in with an unexpectedly gentle attitude. The caution in her eyes was more or less gone now. *Wait, this might actually work? Way to go, hero. Couldn’t have pulled it off without her unwavering faith in you.*

Just like that, we walked quickly through the entrance. First, the lady knight, followed by Nell, and me bringing up the rear.

“What the...?”

Something felt off. The instant I passed through the beat-up door, a weird sensation rushed all the way through my body. I didn’t know what it was, but it definitely didn’t feel *good*. And even though it only lasted for a second, there was no question that it had happened. *What did I just feel?*

“So you noticed. You truly are quite powerful.”

The lady knight watched me with a somewhat surprised expression.

“What was that?”

“You don’t have to be so guarded. You must understand that we wouldn’t just blindly allow a stranger into our sanctuary regardless of Nell vouching for you. That you were able to pass through that door means you hold no ill will toward us. Now, let’s see... Hmm, you are indeed human. That mask of yours doesn’t seem to be a magical tool either.”

A man had made his way over to us from deeper inside and handed her a piece of parchment, which she’d been reading while muttering to us and then to herself.

“Huh?”

The hero unconsciously turned toward Carlotta. I gave her a look that told her to shut the hell up, then shrugged.

“Of course. That’s perfectly natural. I’m just here to support Ne—my lady hero in whatever way she needs.”

“Well, I beg your pardon, then.”

With that, the lady knight’s face genuinely relaxed. For now, it

looked like she'd acknowledged that I wasn't an enemy. I'd take that W. That said, for as much as I was calm, cool, and collected on the surface, my heart was pounding like a drum. *Warning! Danger! This woman's scary as fuck!* She had acted like she was warming up to me when in reality she'd been *testing* me!

Hoo boy, let me tell ya, I was glad I'd asked Nell ahead of time about any magical equipment that could reveal a person's stats. If I hadn't, I would've struck out just now. Y'see, there was a reason they'd determined that I was a human, and no, it wasn't because I'd been magically reborn—*again*—as a human. It was all thanks to a new ability I'd acquired, Camouflage.

This ability let me tinker with my stats just like Lefi had done with hers. In other words, I could show what I wanted people to see and hide what I didn't. Before arriving here, I'd made sure to alter my stats. This was what mine should've looked like to them:

Name: Wye

Race: Human

Class: Thief

Level: 35

HP: 1,603 / 1,603

MP: 1,167 / 1,167

Strength: 411

Stamina: 443

Agility: 682

Magic: 451

Dexterity: 638

Luck: 72

Abilities: Unarmed Combat 3, Stealth 4, Scout 3,

Swordsmanship 1, Water Magic 3

Title: The Adjudicator

My fake name, "Wye," came directly from the first letter of my real name, "Yuki." It was literally just the letter Y with the pronunciation written out. Not even my dumb ass could forget something that simple. I'd set most of my stats about two levels below Nell's, and the "thief" class was something I'd come up with on a whim. For no reason in particular, I'd only left Agility and Dexterity with unusually high values.

I'd also left just the abilities that would make sense with this persona visible. I'd learned that if an ability level was 5 or above, it meant that the user was an expert in that field, so I'd kept all my ability levels low too. As far as water magic went, I sure as hell couldn't have listed "elemental magic" since it was extremely rare, but

listing *something* was gonna make things easier for me if I ever needed to use magic. Besides, outside of a little bit of earth magic here and there, I almost exclusively used water magic.

Lastly, my title. My new stats had felt kinda empty without one, and I'd figured this one wouldn't create any problems for me, so I'd left it. Although I didn't know how far into my stats they'd actually looked, I figured these numbers were good enough to validate me as someone strong even among humans.

By the way, here were my real stats:

Name: Yuki

Race: Demon Lord

Class: Demon Lord of Judgment

Level: 43

HP: 3,101 / 3,101

MP: 10,442 / 10,442

Strength: 911

Stamina: 926

Agility: 818

Magic: 1,161

Dexterity: 1,423

Luck: 73

Ability Points: 0

Special Abilities: Demon Eyes, Polyglot, Flight

Abilities: Inventory, Analysis 8, Unarmed Combat 4, Elemental Magic 5, Stealth 5, Scout 5, Swordsmanship 3, Weapon Enhancement 4, Sorcerer's Grant 4, Traps 1, Greatswordsmanship 2, Camouflage 2, Danger Detection 1

Title: The Demon Lord from Another World, The Supreme Dragon's Owner, The Adjudicator, Enemy of Humanity

Dungeon Points (DP): 104,356

My level had gone up a bit, and my ability levels had improved across the board too. Even Swordsmanship had gone up a level, and that had always been a pain in the ass to increase. Woo-hoo. My new abilities were Greatswordsmanship; Camouflage, which I'd bought specifically for this mission; and Danger Detection. I'd used DP for that one too because I figured it wouldn't hurt to have it just in case.

Greatswordsmanship was exactly like it sounded. The damn thing showed up and went up naturally thanks to my vigorous and enthusiastic use of my greatswords. Camouflage, though, not so much.

I'd dumped all my Ability Points into that one to raise it a level.

Circling back to Camouflage, it worked kinda like Analysis in that it was more effective the higher its level was—which wasn't exactly reassuring since mine was still pretty low. With me just trying to trick some humans, though, I figured it'd work out one way or another. It helped that my current stats were higher than Nell the hero's. Still, if I *did* get found out then yeah, I'd wave the white flag. No other choice in that situation.

"Wye, hm? Under these circumstances, I won't inquire about who or what you are. I have no concerns since you bear us no ill will. So, taking your considerable talents into account, can we rely on your aid?"

"That was my original intent in coming here, you know?"

"You have our thanks. We are undoubtedly in need of more people. Now, then. This time, we will adjourn inside."

Carlotta walked farther into the run-down building.

"Mr. Yuki, what did you do?"

The hero whispered to me while we followed behind her.

"I messed around with my stats. That's why I told you to trust me."

"Got it. Honestly, I was incredibly worried, but I'm relieved to hear that."

You and me both, sister. Almost gave myself a heart attack, dontcha know? That woman had seriously tried to figure me out by pretending to trust me. Sneaky, sneaky.

"This way. The path is rough, so take care to watch where you step."

As we made our way through the plain, shabby house, Carlotta came to an abrupt halt in front of a wall.

"We take the road to our savior."

When she recited those words, a door emerged in the wall with a rumble.

"Woow..."

Incredible. It's a deadass secret door! I'd always wanted to walk through one. I could see a path beyond the door leading underground. The walls were lined with roughly constructed torches, which faintly illuminated the plain passage.

"Shall we go?"

The lady knight started walking again. I followed behind her, sorta kinda internally hyped.



Secret passageways gonna secret passageway, I guess, 'cause there were twists and turns galore in here. If anyone managed to find their

way into this underground path all by their lonesome, they definitely would have ended up completely lost. As the three of us trekked our way through the place, the hero spoke suddenly.

“Miss Carlotta, may I ask you something?”

“What is it?”

“The Undead in the capital... When did they first appear? What’s the situation now?”

The lady knight responded to the questions with a frown.

“Hmm... I need to make it clear that we still don’t know the full extent of what’s going on, but we received our first report of a sighting two weeks ago. It came not too long before His Highness staged his insurrection.”

“Kh... So His Highness really *is* responsible for their appearance...”

“Right. We don’t know the exact methods he utilized, but we believe there’s a strong likelihood that he’s the culprit. You must have seen what condition the town was in, yes? It’s like that because the garrison has made no move to eliminate any of the Undead.”

“Yes, which is why Mr.—no, um, this man and I had discussed how strange it was.”

“‘Mister’?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s me.”

I butted in on their conversation as the lady knight looked at us dubiously.

“Truly? I’ll leave it at that, then. Regarding the topic at hand, to sum up the state of things, these circumstances seem quite convenient for those who are essentially in control of this city at present. They’re apparently unconcerned about the ongoing damage and all the other goings-on.”

Huh, so she’s thinking the same thing Nell is. This whole Undead thing was definitely the enemy’s doing, but the more I thought about everything that was going down, the weirder it felt. Things weren’t adding up. You started a rebellion to try to take over the country, right? Then why the hell would you send out hordes of Undead to purposely infect the people you’re trying to rule?

I guess using them was one means to gain control, but there’d be all sorts of problems once the dust settled. Did they really think that the citizens would just happily let people who were willing and able to let the walking dead run rampant lead them? Was the faction supporting the prince honestly okay with all this? Or was this a choice the prince had made without consulting anyone? Whatever the real reasons were, whoever was behind this was being *real* optimistic if they thought these tactics were the way to go about subjugating a country. In fact, I’d say it was a freaking pipe dream.

Getting back to the real, direct issue of Undead strolling around

everywhere, it amazed me that they'd been left to their own devices for, according to Carlotta, two weeks now. With them out in the open for such a long time, there had to be a serious risk of the contagion spreading.

While Nell and I had been walking through the city, there had been a strong rotting stench coming from every direction imaginable. Saying that it had assaulted our noses was practically an understatement. In this world, where the strange, unknown beast called magic could be found in literally everything, it was hard to be completely sure of anything. But even so, wouldn't it be reasonable to assume that a hugely contagious outbreak in this relatively civilized society would result in a massive number of deaths? Knowing what I did of the Black Death from the Middle Ages on Earth, that seemed like a pretty fair guess.

I couldn't figure out the enemy's true, full plan, but it all still felt weird to me. What was going through his mind? Was he really just planning to drag everyone and everything down with him as he self-destructed?

"During the initial outbreak, we tried to do as much as we could to handle the situation, but their numbers proved unmanageable. Which brings us to now. We've sent out several investigative units to ascertain the cause of the Undead epidemic, but we still have no leads as of yet..."

The lady knight seemed kinda peeved.

"Mr. Yuki, when we were still in the city, you knew the Undead's locations without seeing them. Were you able to glean anything from that?"

At Nell's sneakily whispered question, I shook my head.

"Unfortunately, my Scout ability isn't all-powerful like that. So right now, I can't tell you jack."

I might have been able to find some clues if I could survey the royal capital carefully and thoroughly from the sky. Too bad that wasn't really an option right now.

"But I hear ya. Tomorrow, I'll try to find a way to check things out. Don't expect a whole lot, though."

If a reconnaissance team formed by a legitimate organization couldn't figure out the cause of the Undead problem, then I was for sure gonna have a bitch of a time with it.

"Please and thank you."

While the lady knight gave us the skinny, we kept moving through the maze. Eventually, we could see the light at the end of the tunnel—there was what I assumed was an exit like thirty meters ahead of us. Following behind our guide, the hero and I headed toward that light.

Walking through the opening led us to an *enormous* underground

cathedral.

Several gorgeous pillars stretched way up toward the ceiling. The ceiling itself was completely painted over, with the painting depicting some sort of myth, and had a bunch of magnificent chandeliers hanging from it, lighting up the place. Placed on the geometric-patterned floor were wooden pews, all of them facing a wall inlaid with stained glass windows that illustrated a story. There was a pale light coming from behind them, so seeing as we were underground, my guess was that it was coming from a magical tool.

Beneath the stained glass windows was an elaborate statue of someone who was probably a goddess. She had quite the scowl going, and was flanked by angelic figures—presumably guards. Just looking at them made me want to stand up extra straight.

“Woow...”

That sound of astonishment just kinda slipped out. We seemed to be on the second floor since I could see stairs further ahead that led down. Apparently, the path we’d just taken wasn’t the only one that connected here. I could see a few more of them on the opposite side of where we were.

Seated on the pews on the first floor were troops on standby. From the design of their armor, I’d put my money on them being holy knights just like Nell and Carlotta. Hold up, though. There were a few wearing different equipment. *So even though they’re not affiliated with the Church, they’re here as allies of the anti-prince legion?*

“This place is incredible, isn’t it? I was surprised too the first time I came here.”

“For sure.”

Even a hardcore atheist like me could feel an inexplicable sense of sacredness in the air here. No way, no how would this place suffer the truly wicked. Well, except that I’d snuck my demon lord ass inside, so that was a fun little hitch.

“We make use of this place to hold meetings in secret because the Church has always been under surveillance. The public-facing building is being watched even now, which means a location like this is particularly vital to us.”

“You sure I should be here, then?”

“Yes. Not only am I certain that you have no nefarious motives toward us, but Nell also brought you along, and that matters. She still has a lot to learn about the world, but there’s no denying her intuition about others. There’s no problem.”

“S-Stop that, Miss Carlotta.”

The lady knight rubbed the hero’s head aggressively. For someone who was saying to stop, Nell sure was smiling pretty bright as she looked up at Carlotta. Seeing them like this, I knew Nell thought of

Carlotta as an older sister. It was nice that they were so close.

“In any case, you two have excellent timing. I was just about to gather the troops and hold a strategy meeting. I haven’t decided on the roles you’ll both play when we establish a battle plan just yet, so in the meantime, I ask that you listen in on our discussion.”

With that comment, the lady knight headed toward the stairs leading down. We followed her lead, and once the three of us reached the first floor, the hero and I popped a squat on an empty pew. Carlotta didn’t sit down with us, though. She kept going down the center of the aisle, straight toward the pulpit in the front of the room. After walking behind it and turning to face everyone, she spoke, her voice filling the room.

“My fellows! I am Carlotta Demeyere, knight commander of the Holy Order of Faldienne. With your permission, I’ll be acting as supreme commander of our upcoming military operation!”

Everyone in the cathedral shut up real fast when she started talking.

“Knight commander, eh? Sounds important.”

“Yup. She’s a remarkable person. Her mighty abilities with both the sword and magic led to her selection as the youngest commander of the Holy Order of Faldienne, which itself exists as the keystone of all holy orders of the Church. Even though my attributes are higher than hers, I have yet to win a single duel against her. She’s the only one I still can’t defeat.”

The hero happily bragged about Carlotta—quietly, of course. *Hmm, yeah, the lady knight’s stats were pretty high if I remember right.* This was what Analysis showed me:

Name: Carlotta Demeyere

Race: Human

Class: Holy Knight

Level: 62

HP: 1,312 / 1,312

MP: 3,400 / 3,400

Strength: 387

Stamina: 409

Agility: 552

Magic: 611

Dexterity: 1,192

Luck: 198

Abilities: Holy Magic 5, Fire Magic 5, Swordsmanship 7, Scout 2, Danger Detection 5, Dagger Combat 5, Axe-Wielding 3, Rapier Combat 4, Whip-Wielding 4, Concealed Weapons Combat 4

Title: Sword Princess, Battle Maiden



The first thing to catch anyone's eye was definitely her bajillion weapon-related abilities. Every last one of them was high, but Swordsmanship in particular was downright terrifying at level 7. Even her *titles* were connected to fighting, for crying out loud. "Sword Princess"? "Battle Maiden"? That was some scary-ass shit.

Her overall level was up there too, and her freaking Dexterity had broken 1,000. Wait a sec, did that stat have anything to do with swordsmanship? Nell's was also pretty high, come to think of it. This whole time, I'd assumed it didn't make a difference since I had a crazy high Dexterity value but was complete dogshit at actually handling a sword. Now, though, I thought that maybe I was just plain bad at it.

Uhhh...weeeeell...at least I was good enough with a greatsword to squash my enemies like bugs if I wanted to. Had that going for me, which was nice. Besides, I didn't mess with normal swords on the regular. Couldn't be good at something I didn't do a ton. That was my story and I was sticking to it. Denial was just a river in Egypt. Shut up.

Anyway. Back to our stats chat. The only ones throwing me for a loop were HP and MP. Those two didn't seem like they worked the same way as the others, and I still hadn't figured out how they actually did. So, excluding those two, I'd come up with a ranking system for how a human's stats compared to the average. It was based on the interactions I'd had so far in this world plus some knowledge I'd picked up along the way.

Per my system, a stat that was between 10 and 100 was considered Child-level. The Civilian rank was anywhere from 100 to 200, and Fighter was 200 to 400. Between 400 and 700 was Veteran, 700 to 900 was Expert, and any stats above 900 were Monster-class.

The Fighter category included all kinds of combat jobs, so they could really be anywhere on my list, but most folks fell within the 300 to 400 range for any one stat. I hadn't really run across anyone higher than that yet. Hell, I could count on one hand how many had hit even the 600 mark. Aside from the hero, there was that clown doped up on the magic blade, and the lady knight made three. From a human's perspective, they would all be considered mega strong.

Most of the knights gathered here hovered between 400 and 500 for everything, which had me thinking they were probably part of an elite unit. Even so, Carlotta stood head and shoulders above them all. By the way, the hero was the only one I'd seen so far who had every stat at either Expert or Monster rank.

I had actually asked her about people with numbers like that because I didn't know beans about them in the first place. In response, Little Miss Humble had said, "Well, I can't call myself a master by dint of having high values alone. Especially not when I lose so often. The

numbers you see are only a frame of reference. You can't always assign meaning to them just by looking at them."

I mean, she wasn't *wrong*, but at the same time, this baseline was specifically for humans. As far as other demons and beast folks went, I didn't know much aside from what I'd seen of our maids' stats, so I figured my overall impression of what the values meant would change once I learned more about those types of people's average stats too. Like, just look at my stats. If I ranked myself using this system, I would be Monster-level across the board.

Besides, I wasn't taking abilities into account. To use an admittedly extreme example, let's say someone with Expert-rank stats and Swordsmanship at level 1 was up against someone else with Fighter-rank stats who had Swordsmanship at level 5. There was no way to predict who'd win that fight.

Just like the hero said, it was best to think of stat values as a basic standard only; a fighting style was the deciding factor in their overall strength. To paraphrase something Lefi had told me, anyone who didn't train, even if they were a prodigy, was destined to lose to the ordinary folks who *did* hone their skills. While those thoughts tumbled around in my head, the lady knight kept on speaking.

"Our nation faces annihilation. As a result of the heinous scheme birthed from His Highness Lute Glorio Alisia's insanity, the Undead run amok in our streets. It wouldn't be overstating things to claim that the royal capital is currently at the height of chaos."

The soldiers all listened attentively as her dignified voice rang out.

"We must liberate Arsil, our royal capital, from its monstrous transformation! Each of you gathered here has their own motives, but frankly speaking, we are short of allies at this moment! So let us join arms and wrest victory from our enemies, returning peace and stability to our city! Does anyone here object?!"

Not a peep from any of the troops. They were all focused on her and her alone, passion burning in their eyes.

"Very well! Thus begins our war council!"

After that, Carlotta pulled out a whiteboard-looking thing. She quickly filled it up with all kinds of information, including an explanation of how they would achieve their goal of rescuing the king. The more questions and answers flew back and forth between her and the soldiers, the more she wrote down.

The first step of their battle plan involved troops that had been stationed outside the city in advance. If contact could somehow be reestablished with those guys, half of the force in here would coordinate with them to launch raids on important sites throughout the capital. These attacks were designed to create a diversion by drawing as much attention as possible. Once the enemy was

concentrating on that group, a few of the remaining units would infiltrate the royal castle. Rescuing their king was the primary goal, and if an opportunity presented itself, they'd capture His Royal Assness too. Speaking of, they had succeeded in pinpointing the king's location. He was still very much alive, and had apparently been tossed into the castle dungeon.

Hm... Okay, yeah, that makes sense. But I wanted to plant the fear of a demon lord in the bastards we were dealing with, so it probably wouldn't hurt for me to go in ahead of the rescue team. You know, pave the way for them by having the poor schmucks ready to hand over when the extraction squad arrived.

"We will carry out our plan tomorrow, in the dead of night. All units will commence when the church bell tolls. That is all. Any questions? Then, everyone, that concludes our meeting! Victory will be ours!"

"Victory will be ours!"

With a battle cry to end the war council, the cathedral erupted with activity. Soldiers moved in groups to begin their preparations. The lady knight left her post at the altar and came back to us.

"Great job, Miss Carlotta. You were awe-inspiring."

"I appreciate the sentiment. Lighting a fire under others can be very tiring."

She gave Nell a wry smile before continuing.

"Since you two arrived here just today, that must mean you don't have anywhere to sleep, correct? If not, I know just the place—"

Suddenly, a shout cut her off.

"Alert! Everyone, on your guard! Undead!"

A holy knight came charging into the cathedral, clearly flustered. All of the soldiers in the place immediately stopped what they were doing and drew their weapons.

"Jerome! Status report, now!"

"The Undead have invaded the cathedral! There are dozens already, and their numbers are increasing, so I don't have an exact count!"

As they talked urgently, my Scout ability picked up hostility coming from something. I couldn't see anything just yet, but they were definitely in Scout's detection range now. Because the route we'd taken to get to this cathedral had been so convoluted, Maps was showing a lot of blank spaces in the surrounding area, so there weren't any— *Ah ha, there we go.* Dots started popping up, and they were hella close. Not even twenty meters out.

"Hrngrahhhh..."

We heard throaty, nonsense moans. When I turned my head to look, I saw Undead trudging out of a bunch of the paths linking to the

cathedral. The holy knights closest to those paths used their shields to block the way, with any unguarded spaces between them being taken up by other soldiers who weren't holy knights. Their attacks slowed the invaders' progress even further.

Wow, that's amazing. Their speedy defense was proof of their skill and experience. I damn sure wouldn't want to screw with them. They were an entirely different breed from the dipshits who had tried—and failed—to attack my dungeon.

"Tch. Units 1, 2, and 3, intercept immediately! Unit 4, split up into pairs and verify whether the Undead have penetrated any other routes! Unit 5, you're on standby as the quick response team!"

"Understood!"

After organizing the troops and confirming they were carrying out their various orders, Carlotta turned back to Jerome, the man who had first raised the alarm.

"Jerome, is there a chance that this attack was launched by the enemy?"

"I-I don't believe so. I think it's most likely that the Undead wandering around in the sewers found this place purely by coincidence. I had eliminated the first few that appeared, but I'm assuming the sound of battle lured the others to me. Their numbers gradually went up, to the point that I as a lone sentinel couldn't manage them."

"The sewers?"

I directed my question at the hero, who was standing next to me and looking worried. She nodded before replying.

"This cathedral is also connected to the sewer system. The sewers are a good way to throw off any enemies as well as secure an escape route for ourselves."

"Oh, yeah. Your original plan was for us to use a sewer duct to get into the royal capital, wasn't it?"

"That's right. The drainage network stretches all throughout the city, which means that one can sneak in and out through various routes. It's a very complicated structure, though, so even if an enemy invaded, they wouldn't know the correct path to take. They would need an incredible amount of luck to make it this far."

Interesting. A sewer system winding its way beneath the royal capital. But apparently, the Undead had managed to draw the right straw seeing as they'd found their way in here. Carlotta's face got bleaker as she listened to Jerome's report.

"Well, this makes for quite the headache. Despite being outnumbered by the enemy, our resources continue to be consumed by this fruitless battle against the Undead. If their strategy is to force a devastating toll on us, then they may yet succeed."

“About that. You mentioned that you and your people still don’t know what caused the Undead outbreak, right?”

“Indeed. We’ve searched most of the capital, but alas, we were unable to find anything.”

Carlotta answered my question after brushing Jerome off with a “Don’t worry about it” when he’d asked who I was. Maybe it was because she’d managed to get a handle on this current incident right out of the gate, but she didn’t seem impatient or discouraged. She did look kinda anxious, though.

“Then who—or what—do you think is behind it?”

“If this is a man-made issue, there will either be a summoning circle somewhere or a necromancer using nonstandard magic. Outside of human interference, a massive stagnation of negative energy that spontaneously came into existence and monsters capable of summoning the Undead lurking in the vicinity come to mind. With that in mind, I have no doubt this is humans’ doing.”

“Negative energy”? Like that evil aura my Zaien was known and unloved for back when it was that cursed magic blade?

“And which one of those do you think is the culprit here?”

“The summoning circle. A necromancer doesn’t need to be overly powerful to create one, and maintaining it is relatively easy as well. Once it’s been laid down, a summoning circle can produce Undead indefinitely.”

Hmm... Oh, that reminds me. Those black-robed dickheads from back in Alfiro used a summoning circle, didn’t they?

“Oookay... I’m pretty sure you guys have already had this idea, but just to cover all our bases, is it possible that there’s a summoning circle in the sewer system? Nell mentioned how elaborate it is, and you did say your people haven’t been able to discover the outbreak’s source.”

“Yes, I considered that possibility. An extremely large summoning circle would be required to call forth such huge numbers of the Undead. Since we couldn’t find any traces of such aboveground, I wondered if it might be below, but we haven’t found anything down here either. Granted, that may be because we haven’t surveyed every nook and cranny of the sewers.”

So basically, there might be more going on than meets the eye.

“In any case, showing you to your cots will, unfortunately, have to come later. Nell, you and I will join the intercepting units on the front line. As for you, Masked Man...”

“I’m tagging along, of course. After all, it’s my duty as Madam Hero’s faithful servant to follow her wherever she goes.”

My response came with a shrug.

“Mm, is that so? Then I look forward to seeing what you’re truly

capable of!”

With that parting shot, Carlotta swung her sword without even looking at her target. That one slash cut a nearby Undead’s top half clean off its bottom half.

“O raving abomination, I bid thee return to your final resting place. Undead Away!”

Nell’s spell did its job and finished off the Undead. That was exactly what made these things such a nuisance, though: it took more than just slicing and dicing to take them down for good. Other methods were a must if we wanted to put a lid on the problem.

Compared to these pains in the ass, taking out corpses on Earth was a piece of cake. One solid hit to the skull and they were toast. Well, okay, realistically speaking, I couldn’t tell you if that would work in the event of a *real* zombie outbreak there.

Anyway, as we already knew, the walking dead here kept right on walking even with their heads lopped off.

“Guess I’ll get to work too.”

Which weapon to use, though? For starters, a greatsword is out of the question. Honestly, I was freaking dying to use Zaien, but it was just too damn big. There wasn’t enough room in here to swing it around the way I would have liked. All the Church guys all over the place made friendly slashing a huge risk. Same problem with all my greatswords that weren’t Zaien.

On our way here, we hadn’t been quite so cornered, so I’d just chucked Undead around with my bare hands. But I really, *really* didn’t want to touch a person’s guts ever again, even if they were just a ghoul at this point. Nope. Nuh-uh. Wasn’t gonna happen. I hated that shit and I was *done*.

Having made my decision, I pulled out my rebar from Inventory. It’d been a hot minute since I’d last used it and I hadn’t actually used it for that long, but I sure did remember that it took literally zero effort. I could swing it around on autopilot and finish the job no sweat.

Since my current class was Thief, I *had* toyed around with the idea of dual-wielding daggers. Then I’d imagined getting myself killed because I had no idea how to use them and was just doing it to look cool. That would’ve sucked all kinds of ass, and I wasn’t about that life, so no thank you.

“Mr. Yuki, is that a weapon?”

“Yeah, nice and easy to work with. I can’t go with my usual here because it’s too big for this place.”

“Oh, yes. I recall your weapon being quite large and heavy. But isn’t the thing you’re holding meant for building a house or something?”

“So?”

“You know what? From now on, I’m just going to ignore you whenever you say or do something that’s way too much like you, Mr. Yuki.”

Laughing behind my mask, I shrugged at the exasperated Nell.

“I hate to interrupt your friendly banter, but we have to go right away as backup. We must secure the premises quickly so that we can prepare for tomorrow’s mission.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Aye, aye.”

Nell and I followed Carlotta to lend a hand to the soldiers still fighting the Undead.

We’d succeeded in mopping up the hordes of invading Undead relatively quickly. There’d been a buttload of ’em, but at the end of the day, they were slow, stupid corpses. At first, it’d looked like the disciplined, organized soldiers were at a disadvantage, but they’d managed to take care of business without any serious injuries.

A lot of them had been totally dumbstruck by the nutcase swinging around a piece of rebar instead of a sword, but, you know, I kept the dramatics mostly to a minimum. All’s well that ends well, I say. Minus the whole Undead thing, of course.

Anyway, after that, the holy knights and I headed for the sewers we figured our not-so-welcome guests had used to get inside this cathedral. We needed to secure any and all routes in if we were going to guarantee everyone’s safety. Which brought us to now.

“So *that’s* it...”

Not that I actually knew what it was. I just *felt* it. Mixed in with the sewer’s stench was a corrupted magical energy that made my skin crawl. “Repulsive” didn’t even *begin* to describe it—no way, no how was I gonna drag my feet in this place. Maybe this was why the holy knights had given up on searching for the summoning circle down here? The gross magic floating around was so thick that I could definitely see it being basically impossible for them to try to pinpoint the thing’s location.

“Oh well. I should be able to work with this.”

Mind made up, I headed toward Carlotta so I could tell her about my plan. She was up at the front of the group, leading the holy knights as they took care of any Undead stragglers still hanging out in the sewers.

“Carlotta. I think I know where the summoning circle is.”

“Oh, do you? I must say, you sound quite confident.”

“No promises, so just take what I’m about to say with a grain of salt.”

Right now, I was using two of my abilities: Demon Eyes and Scout. By using them together to survey the area more closely, I could clearly see that the grody magic was a whole lot thicker than its surroundings in one direction than it was in any other. I'd first noticed it in the middle of our battle against the Undead a little bit ago. The unholy pool of energy seemed to be coming from the small amounts of magic that oozed out of the Undead themselves. It apparently stayed where it was, getting denser the more Undead there were.

That specific area being so thick with the stuff was proof that tons of Undead were passing through there. It *had* to be the Undead's birthplace. That was the only reason I could think of for there to be so much filthy magic gathered in one spot.

Right, then. Back to my plan. I wanted to follow this energy's trail and see where it led; there was a damn good chance I'd find the source of the Undead outbreak. At least, I hoped there was. Even Scout was telling me there were a bunch of enemies in the direction of the corruption, so I was almost positive that my theory was right on the money.

Of course, Carlotta and company didn't know about most of the abilities I had. I'd hidden them for a reason, you know. What kinda dumbass would willingly show all his cards? Not this one, thank you very much. That was why I only gave Carlotta an abridged version of my idea.

"Hmm, I see. There may be merit in taking this risk, then... Understood. I'll leave the others to secure the immediate vicinity while we execute your plan."

Carlotta immediately handed down orders to holy knights nearby. Once she was finished, she called out to Nell, who'd been fighting a bit away from us.

"Come, Nell. We're going to destroy the outbreak's suspected origin."

"Huh? So we know the location?!"

"Perhaps, but I was told there were 'no promises.'"

My mouth practically hung open in amazement at how proactive Carlotta was being. I couldn't help but make a comment about it.

"Well, dang. I sure didn't have to work all that hard to convince you, huh?"

"Regardless of whether you're right or wrong, at present, there's no downside to us believing you. Should your guess be correct, it'll benefit us greatly, and should it be incorrect, the situation will remain unchanged. Presented with those outcomes, wouldn't you agree that acting is our best move?"

"When you put it that way, yeah, I guess I would."

I laughed wryly at the lady knight's daring smile.

After that, we grabbed a few holy knights and separated from the main group to venture further into the sewers. I took point since I'd made the suggestion in the first place.

"Rngnahhh..."

As the leader of our ragtag pack, it was my job to clear our path of any attacking Undead. I sent them flying into the aether with my rebar while Carlotta, Nell, and the handful of holy knights we'd brought with us cleaned up whatever I missed or didn't one-shot. They also kept a close eye on any of the side routes so that we wouldn't get hit with a surprise attack.

"I must say, Masked Man, you really are quite proficient fighting with that weapon."

"Miss Carlotta, I strongly recommend you don't concern yourself with his eccentricities. He's a bit of an odd fellow, so they never end."

"Is that right? Well, never mind, then. I trust your judgment."

"Hello? You know I'm not deaf, yeah?"

How rude! Is it my fault rebar is so stinkin' easy to use? I think not. I told them that too, following the trail of magic courtesy of my Demon Eyes as I did. *I fucking knew it.* The deeper we went, the thicker it got. Also, I noticed that though Nell and Carlotta didn't seem particularly bothered by the stuff, the other holy knights looked like they were struggling.

Their discomfort reminded me of that time I'd whipped out the cursed magic blade I'd used to make Zaien in front of the chief administrator and his people. People with lower stats had reacted to it a lot like how these knights were reacting now, while folks with higher stats had reacted—or *not* reacted—more like Nell and Carlotta. In other words, it was definitely doing something to their bodies, and not something good. It made sense that magical energy this nasty would fuck up someone's system if they inhaled it, though.

"Such a heavy stagnation... With it so dense now, even I can sense that there's something here. Well done, Masked Man. To be frank, I'm surprised you were able to trace it such a long distance."

"I had to prove I was useful, y'know? Didn't want you or anyone else questioning why I— Wait, what?"

I stopped walking.

"What's wrong, Mr. Wye?"

"...It's gone."

"Huh?"

"We managed to follow the trail here, but this is where it ends. Shit."

We were at a three-way intersection right now, but there was no way forward. The corrupted energy was weak in all three directions—left, right, and even straight ahead on the path we'd been following.

This *should* have been our final destination.

“Hm... I think our field of expertise might come in handy with this. Troops, you know what we need to do!”

“Yes, Commander!”

At her order, the rest of the holy knights immediately began inspecting our surroundings. A few minutes later, one of them made a discovery.

“I found it! There’s a keyhole and drag marks showing this wall has been moved!”

“Excellent work!”

“Damn, no kidding.”

When I went to check, I could see a keyhole hidden within a little dip in the stone wall. It was harder to see the drag marks—probably because it was so dark—but if they were sure that the wall had been moved, I’d take their word for it.

“Man, I’m amazed you guys even managed to find this in the first place.”

“Not to boast, but dealing with these kinds of challenges *is* our specialty. All right, step back a bit please.”

So saying, Carlotta unsheathed her sword.

FWOOSH.

One slash, then another. With just two swings of her sword, that section of the wall crumbled, opening up the path hidden behind it. *Sweet baby Jesus... Did she just...slice through...a goddamn stone wall?!*

“It seems there was indeed a secret passage. At the very least, this suggests that something is hidden further ahead. Impressive, Masked Man.”

“Uh, th-thanks...”

Seeing as she was on the verge of pinpointing the source of something that had been a major problem for her for a long time, the lady knight was grinning like a mofo. To be honest, it kinda scared me, so you *know* I kept my response to myself. *I gotta make sure I never piss her off.*

Beyond the hole in the wall Carlotta had quite literally cut open was a steep set of stairs wide enough for two adults to walk down side by side. The lady knight and the hero both peered down it to try to see what was ahead, and they both gave the same disgusted look.

“This is...”

“...atrocious.”

The magic drifting up was so concentrated it made my stomach lurch. It made the trail we’d followed this far feel like fresh air. On top of that, it completely changed the situation we were in. Before, only the rando knights had gotten all funky because of the stuff, but now, even Nell and Carlotta looked like they were having a rough go of it.

No, wait, scratch that. The rando knights were actually in a *worse* position than the girls. Poor guys were trying their absolute best just to keep themselves from blowing chunks up and down the sewers. They sure as hell weren't going to make it if they went any further.

"I see anything more will be impossible for the rest of you, so remain on watch here. Secure an escape route just in case."

Seemed Carlotta and I were on the same wavelength. Silently admitting defeat at having reached their limits, they obeyed her command. Given the looks on their faces, though, they weren't exactly happy about it.

"Masked Man, how are you faring?"

"I'm fine. Don't worry about me."

"And you, Nell?"

"I'm fine too."

"Right, then. It'll be just the three of us, will it? I know you're both aware, but we have to be on high alert moving forward. We can't afford to drop our guard for even a single second. I don't know what we'll encounter, but I *do* know that we'll encounter *something*."

Once Nell and I nodded to let her know we were on the same page, the three of us began our trek down the staircase. Our footsteps echoed and we held our breaths as we walked, all of us feeling at least a little bit anxious the whole way. Eventually, finally, we arrived at the bottom.

There, we saw a truckload of Undead, packed tight like sardines.

"Mother of God..."

An Undead paradise. A world of death. Those words sprang to mind at the sight before me. Their numbers were insane. The place itself was as big as a school gym, and these corpses had it filled to capacity, man. They were prowling around all creepily too.

I would've been lying if I said I hadn't been aware of what we might run into since there'd been a huge number of red dots flashing on Maps. In that sense, this wasn't *completely* unexpected, but like, actually *seeing* it was messing me up. It looked like something straight out of hell.

This place was probably a collection point for all the water coming in from outside. A bunch of canals met up here, and dead bodies were flowing in with the water itself. My best guess was that the corpses arrived here, were turned into Undead, and then made their way back out. As for the source of the corpses themselves, I couldn't think of anything else except the prince's supporters having a hand in it.

"Oookay, so no doubt the summoning circle is here, but *where* in here, exactly?"

"Maybe...over there?"

In a subdued tone, Nell pointed toward...stakes? They were hard to make out with all the Undead shuffling around everywhere, but I managed to catch a glimpse of them sticking out of the ground. They were around knee height.

"There are several of them, are there? Ah, I see, a hexagram-shaped summoning circle. Okay, we're finally making progress. We'll need to remove at least two of the stakes. What say you, Nell?"

"I agree. This... This is my first time seeing a summoning circle on this scale."

"Wait, what? Somebody wanna clue me in here?"

Watching the two of them somehow just figure out what the hell was happening, I demanded an explanation. Turned out that the summoning circle was structured as a six-pointed star, aka a hexagram. Specifically, it was drawn by magically joining six stakes placed equal distances apart from each other. *Ah ha...* I used my Demon Eyes to get an extra-thorough look at the design. It was damn hard to see anything clearly because of the thick, gross magical energy, but I finally managed to make out that two magic lines were coming from each stake. And thus, a star was born.

Since the hexagram was made up of two triangles, breaking them both would completely disable the summoning circle. That was what Carlotta and Nell were discussing—taking a stake out of each one would destroy the formations and zero out the circle's power.

"To be on the safe side, I'd like to remove all the stakes and ensure the circle's total nullification, but we'll need to break through that mob of corpses to even get to them."

Carlotta stared at the mass of Undead. I could tell just by looking at her that she wasn't sure how to move forward.

"My time to shine. I'll handle the Undead, and while I do that, you two can take care of the stakes."

"Do you have a plan, Mr. Wye?"

"You're about to find out."

With a wicked smirk, I called up my magic, focusing harder than I usually do to activate my power. Instantly, a water dragon appeared, though this one was *ginormous*. It was almost four times as big as its usual size, and just absolutely freaking majestic. Normally, magic on a scale this huge would consume enormous amounts of magical energy, but that wasn't a problem this time. Why? Because I didn't have to use pseudo-water created from magic. The water that was already in here was perfect for the job.

"M-Mr. Wye?! What in the world?!"

"The fastest way to deal with enemies like this is with a frontal attack! Go!!!"

At my signal, my dragon blasted off, jaws opening wide to snap up

its Undead prey. Its giant body slithered around as it consumed the living dead. When I'd decided it had eaten its fill, I squeezed the hand I was holding up into a fist. Doing so made my dragon coil up, twisting itself into a sphere. The droves of Undead still inside it were now trapped in a makeshift water prison.

"There you have it, ladies! A water slide, and a darn good one, if I do say so myself! I hope all you folks inside are enjoying the ride!"

"Oh ho. Nicely done, Masked Man! Nell, we can take out all the stakes now! I'll start at the left, and you can go from the right!"

"Eep! U-Understood!"

The two of them broke away from me, racing in their respective directions. Of course, it would have been impossible for my dragon to gobble up every single Undead, and some had even escaped from their aquatic cell, but these ladies could more than handle the few of them that were left. They were so strong that there may as well not have been any. I believed in their ability to TKO the creepy-crawlies.

They weren't going as far as completely taking out the Undead, probably because it was too much of a hassle to do all the extra work, but either way, they made quick work of cutting down any zombies that got too close. Once they'd safely made it to where the stakes were, they started at their designated ends and pulled them all out one by one. It looked like they were stuck pretty deep into the ground, so I kinda thought that even a big, beefy dude would have trouble yanking one out. *You know what? No. I'm gonna stop myself right there and seal away those thoughts deep in the darkest recesses of my mind.* I'd do my absolute best to not have such an insulting idea ever again.

"Mission complete!"

"I took them all out too!"

"All right, then stand back!"

At my shout, they immediately moved away from the summoning circle and started heading straight toward me, still holding the stakes. As soon as they were close enough to me that they wouldn't be caught in the blast zone, I undid my water dragon's magic. Then, we all ran a little ways up the stairs, just in time for the floating water prison to give in to gravity and fall down. That vast volume of water and Undead crashed hard into the ground, submerging the whole area.

We waited for a bit for the surging tempest to let up. After deciding that most of the water had returned to its various waterways, we headed back down the stairs to make sure our plan had worked. Lo and behold, the Undead weren't moving. Almost all the ones left behind had returned to their original state, meaning they were now just regular ol' dead bodies.

"W-We did it! Miss Carlotta, Mr. Wye, we actually did it!"

"That we did. I can hardly believe it was such a simple solution

too. You have my thanks, Masked Man. Because of you, I have one less insufferable headache tormenting me after all this time.”

“Glad to be of service. I’m honored to have contributed to you finally getting a good night’s sleep. Or close to it, at least.”

“Ha ha! It won’t just be me, though. I’m certain many more will be relieved enough to sleep more soundly too.”

Carlotta’s usually stern expression softened a bit. She was actually smiling now. At that point, I noticed a few Undead that were still “alive” in the sewer, so I asked about them.

“Um, why are they still moving?”

“Those are specimens who have existed for too long as Undead.”

“What do you mean?”

“Right, so, those who have been forcefully resurrected as Undead through the use of a summoning circle can be split into two basic categories, the short-lived and the long-lived. With the former, if not too much time has passed since their unfortunate return, they’ll revert into corpses after the summoning circle collapses. The long-lived, however, are those who were reanimated so long ago that their existences actually become established as full-fledged monsters. They can survive and move even without their summoning circle’s binding force.”

“Gotcha.”

In other words, once their condition stabilizes, so to speak, the summoning circle becomes irrelevant.

“Then we’re not totally rid of the Undead problem, are we?”

“You’re not wrong, but now that we’ve managed to cut off its major source, the Undead situation in the capital will resolve itself soon. No longer having to worry about this particular threat has taken quite a weight off our shoulders. We essentially just have to wait for conditions to improve now. Once again, you have my thanks. You really came to our rescue.”

“I’m grateful too. Thank you, Mr. Wye, for helping our city and our people.”

“Why don’t you save that for after this is all over, yeah?”

When I replied with a shrug, both lady knights’ expressions tightened up. They nodded in agreement, a sharp glint in their eyes.

“Hmm... Indeed. We’ll have to act tomorrow as well. I know it’s grown quite late, but we must get some rest regardless. This time for sure, I’ll lead you to your beds.”



Alone in a room, a certain individual clenched their teeth.

“Tch... So the summoning circle has been destroyed.”

An urgent report stating that the Undead in the royal capital were

no longer moving had been brought to them. This change signified that the summoning circle had been discovered and destroyed—an unexpected turn of events. The circle had been drawn in a location that had been thoroughly inspected in advance. As a further precautionary measure, a physical trick had been used to hide it rather than a magical one. And yet...

“Well, no matter. The corpses worked hard. Now, all that’s left is for me to complete this task so we can forge ahead.”

A sneer flashed across the person’s face, only briefly breaking their serious expression. They then began concentrating on their own job: putting the finishing touches on the corpse that lay before them.



“Bwa ha ha ha ha! Stop right there, you brats! I, the Great and Evil Demon Lord, will feast on your flesh!”

“Nooooo!!!”

The kids shrieked in delight as I chased after them. While they were running away from me, one of them tripped over their own feet and tumbled to the ground.

“Whoopsie. You gotta be careful when you’re escaping. If you’re not, a big, bad demon lord will capture you.”

“Hee hee hee. Thank you, Mishter Demon Lawd.”

“You got it. A demon lord is wicked, but that doesn’t mean he can’t be a gentleman too.”

After helping the kid back up, I patted their head playfully before going back to cackling maniacally and chasing the group. When I did, three little rugrats blocked my way.

“You’re a bad demon lord! We’re gonna beat you!”

“So the heroes have finally arrived! Bah! You think the likes of *you* can really defeat *me*?!”

“Take this! Holy shword addack!”

“Fiyah magic!”

“Sword attack two!”

Playing along with their antics, I put on a damn good show of being blown away by their assault, pretending to stagger in pain.

“Gaaahhh! F-Fiddlesticks... Does my ambition end here...? But heed this warning: do not become careless. With my defeat, a second and third demon lord will appear, and they will most definitely crush y— H-Hey, whoa there, you mini tyrants. Take it easy. I just started my monolo— Huh?! Th-That’s dangerous, dang it!”

I couldn’t stop laughing as more and more kids dogpiled me after I’d caught the first few when they’d launched themselves at me. The others apparently wanted to get in on the fun too. *Kid gang rise up, I guess?*

“You’ve completely won them over, hm? Not to mention that you seem quite at home in your demon lord role.”

I was currently on the floor being crushed by a mob of children. Nell crouched down next to me and giggled as she watched our little show.

“Well, it takes one to play one, doesn’t it?”

I bet these kids had no idea that they were playing hero and demon lord with the real thing. Never mind that there was a real hero right in front of us too.

“In any case, you’re quite good with children, huh, Mr. Wye?”

“Only natural seeing as I have so much experience with them at home.”

That said, in our family, the kids wanted to be the demon lords, so I always ended up playing the hero. My job in that version of the game was to attack the demon lords, then have them turn the tables on me. For us, the demon lord was on the right side of justice.

“You wanna try being a Great and Evil Demon Lord too? If you act now, you’ll get a spare mask for free! Hurry while supplies last!”

“No thanks.”

Daaamn, no hesitation. She didn’t even stop to think about it. Oof.

The lady knight Carlotta, who’d been watching the whole time, let out a laugh. Seemed like she was enjoying herself. Then, she turned to chat with the woman standing next to her.

“I’m sorry again for our sudden, unannounced arrival.”

“Please, don’t concern yourself with that. Especially not when the Church does so much for us all. Plus, it’s nice to see the children enjoying themselves like this.”

The woman who ran this place—an orphanage—smiled happily as she talked with Carlotta. After everything that had gone down yesterday, Carlotta had brought us here because this place was under Church administration. Apparently, most lodgings within the capital itself were currently shut down. The ones still up and running were so few and far between that there might as well have been none at all.

Accommodations maintained by the Church were also out of commission for regular use. They had been converted to shelters for the handful of troops still fighting the good fight in the capital, so this orphanage was all that was left. Hotels were—well, not just hotels, but all kinds of businesses around the city were closed right now. The main reason was the Undead outbreak, of course, but there was also a food shortage thanks to the total blockade of the capital.

The royal capital kept up its food supplies mainly through imports from the surrounding towns and cities. But due to the whole ongoing coup thing here, the merchants who delivered those goods refused to make the trip. Tradespeople were sensitive to danger, and for good

reason. There was the possibility of losing their lives if they were caught up in the conflict. There was also the chance that their cargo would be confiscated by the military just because.

Another thing I learned was the truth of how said military treated these folks. Stationed on the outer walls, they forced the small and mid-sized companies—and the merchants who belonged to them—that brought in supplies to sell the military whatever they wanted at a tenth of their regular price. This was before these people could even enter the city and go about their business there. So who in their right mind would go out of their way to stop by when they were literally losing money like that? The whole Undead thing didn't help either, obviously.

Large companies and their people were a different story. They could afford to come and go as they pleased, and they could do it safely too. Unfortunately for everyone else, though, they had taken advantage of the current situation to jack up their prices. Allegedly, they were charging folks here an arm and a leg for anything and everything, so the price of basic necessities had gone through the roof.

Entire food surpluses that shops had stocked up as reserves had also been confiscated by the military. With so much extortion happening all at once, most of the city's residents had fallen on extremely hard times. The desperation was so bad that folks were on the verge of fighting each other for a single loaf of bread.

By the way, you might be wondering about the prince and his bitch-ass comrades who'd brought all this crap on these people. Well, I had some info on that front too. Given the mayhem those dirtbag traitors had caused, naturally, they were up to their usual no-good political maneuvering, trying to drum up support wherever they could. They didn't need to talk to any nobles in the anti-prince faction because there were plenty of neutral aristocratic families they could target instead. By convincing those guys to side with them, the prince and his lackeys were attempting to establish their right of control over the country through supposedly legitimate allies.

Because of that, the clock was ticking for the anti-prince faction. Right now, the prince's side had the upper hand, and that was the cue for a bunch of opportunistic fence-sitters who'd been biding their time to see which way the wind blew to finally pick a team—his. Knowing that they were losing ground by the minute, Carlotta and the others were working their asses off preparing to carry out the battle plan they'd come up with at yesterday's strategy meeting.

"Thank you so much for keeping the children company even though you're a guest here."

"It's totally cool. You're letting me stay here for free, so it's the least I can do to return the favor."

I shrugged, smiling as I replied to the apologetic-looking woman. Not that she could see my smile since it was hidden by my mask.

“You know, I didn’t intend to dig into your identity, but I must admit, Masked Man, I’m rather curious about you now. You seem young, but is it possible you already have children of your own?”

The lady knight turned in my direction while questioning me.

“Weeell, I basically have two little sisters who always make me play with them.”

“Hey, Mr. Masked Man! Let’s play demon lord one more time!”

“Sounds good to me. You’d better prepare yourselves—”

Just as I was about to keep talking, a tiny gurgling sound came from one of the kids’ stomachs.

“Uh-oh, are you hungry?”

“Yeah... But everyone else is too, so it’s okay.”

Ah, shit, that’s right. The food shortage. I’d completely forgotten about it because the kids were so energetic, but now, I knew they’d just been putting on brave faces. To be totally honest, the breakfast they’d shared with me hadn’t amounted to much either, so I wondered if they’d had anything decent to eat lately. *Dammit. Could I possibly be any slower on the uptake?*

“Okay, I have an idea. Nell, come with me. We’re grilling meat.”

“Huh? W-Wait, wait, we are?! This is so sudden!”

“Dontcha know that it’s important to chow down before doing anything? It’ll take too long for me to do it all on my own, so you’re gonna help me. ’Scuse me, we’re gonna borrow your kitchen.”

“Oh? Why, yes, of course. Please feel free.”

I dragged the hero off to the kitchen, and we got ready to do some serious cooking. Watching us, Carlotta whispered quietly to herself.

“Isn’t he supposed to be *her* servant?”



“All right, everyone, single file! If you don’t line up, I won’t serve you!”

Standing behind a table in the orphanage’s surprisingly big courtyard, the hero spoke to the kids in front of her. She was wearing an apron and stirring a pot of beef stew with a ladle.

“Okaaay!”

The children answered like the good little boys and girls they were. Then, they made a line, each of them holding a wooden bowl.

“Oh ho? Such an enticing aroma. What’s this dish called, Nell?”

“Beef stew. He did most of the cooking, so you can ask him for all the details. Regardless, we have plenty! So, Miss Carlotta and Miss...Filny, was it? Would you two like some as well?”

“Hmm. Yes, I believe I’ll join you all.”

“In that case, I think I’ll have a taste as well. Really, thank you so much, especially since you’re our guests...”

“Please don’t worry about it. He already said as much, but this is the least we can do for showing up out of the blue like we did.”

I stood nearby, listening to their conversation while cutting child-sized portions from a massive piece of roast meat. The kids were apparently curious about what I was doing since several of them were watching me like hawks. No, wait, they were just excited about the meat itself. I could relate. I still wasn’t totally sold on beef stew and roast meat as a food combo, but they were both delicious, so no biggie.

Why beef stew, you ask? Because I didn’t have any rice on me. At a time like this, I would have loved to make a classic Japanese-style curry, but past me hadn’t had the foresight to toss rice in Inventory just in case. I did have roux, though, so when I thought about what I could make with just that, I settled on beef stew.

“Okey dokey, next kid, step right up.”

“Me! Mister, your mask is so cool!”

“Thanks, kiddo! You’ve got a good eye, dontcha? Here, just for that, you get an extra piece.”

“Hooray!”

I placed the meat in the little girl’s beef stew-filled bowl. Confession: I’d been giving all the kids an extra piece anyway, so they’d all ended up with two. They’d been quick to pick up on the fact that complimenting my mask would net them the bonus meat, but that was fine. I got what I wanted, and so did they. They might have thought my mask was just a meal ticket for now, but they’d understand its true charm the more they complimented it. Probably. Eventually. Game had to recognize game. *I won’t be here forever, though.*

Speaking of my mask, it had changed a little bit. Nothing major, just that instead of being a full-face mask, it now had a hole where the mouth was. While Nell and I had been holed up in the kitchen, I’d made that tweak so I could eat later too. Imagine if I carelessly took it off during mealtimes because it got in the way of me stuffing myself. That would be a seriously smooth-brain way of exposing my mug.

And look, I knew it might not have been *totally* necessary to go to so much trouble to hide my face, but let’s be honest, there was something cool and mysterious about a dude who’s always wearing a mask. Am I right, or am I right? As the leading authority on myself, I’d like to definitively state that yes, a majority of my behaviors *were* governed by such superficial thought patterns. Thanks for coming to my TED Talk.

“I just want to ask, but are you sure about all this? The meat looks

like monster meat, and you used a good amount of spices as well, didn't you? This must have cost quite a bit."

As I took in the sight of the kids joyfully shouting "Yummy!" I replied with a shrug.

"I can easily hunt monsters like these without breaking a sweat. And the spices...well, I guess you could call them homemade? Yeah, that's the best way to describe them, so it's not like I broke the bank on them."

Technically speaking, the beef stew's ingredients are DP-sourced.

Besides, maybe it was because Iluna and Shii were part of my family, but seeing these tykes living with so little made my chest ache something fierce. And let me tell you, I could never have imagined my attitude toward children doing a complete one-eighty from how I'd felt about them in my previous life. Everything I did was for my own self-satisfaction, of course...but with this image burned into my eyes, I decided my new plan of action would revolve around saving the kids.

Just then, I heard people talking out in front of the orphanage. I had wanted the kids to experience a barbecue, hence I'd held our little buffet in the courtyard, but it seemed like the smell of it had drawn others over.

"Oy, you smell something amazing too?"

"Yeah. I've never smelled anything like it before, but I bet it's delicious. Ahhh, I'm so hungry..."

When I checked to see what all the hubbub was about, I saw a decent-sized crowd facing the orphanage from out on the street. They peeked into the courtyard with envious gazes. *Hmm... Good timing actually.*

"Hey, Nell, can you handle things here for a bit?"

"Huh? Oh, sure."

Leaving her in charge of the meat station, I headed over to the crowd. I stopped in front of them, folding my arms and taking up an aggressive stance. Totally ignoring their suspicious "Who the heck is this guy?" stares, I raised my voice.

"You all hungry?!"

"Y-Yeah!"

Despite their initial wariness, they seemed to guess what I was leading to with my question, so the onlookers yelled back in agreement.

"You wanna eat some meat?!"

"Yeaah!!!"

When they heard the magic word, their excitement went through the roof.

"Then I'll feed ya! But you're gonna have to work for your meal!"

I opened up Inventory and started pulling out monster carcasses.

“Y-Yeah?”

Everyone got nervous as they watched a bunch of monster remains show up out of nowhere. I’d planned on giving all the meat I already prepped to the orphanage, but real talk, I was feening for some real bad too. I’d only been holding back because it was a pain in the ass to clean and quarter the full carcasses left in Inventory. Luckily for me, though, these people had done me a solid by showing up when they did. Now, I could leave the pain in the ass that was butchering to them.

“I’m out of ingredients for the stew, but if you’re good with meat, as you can see, I have more than enough to spare. But as you can *also* see, I haven’t done anything with the bodies, so if you wanna eat, you better hop to it!”

A few people in the crowd stepped forward at my announcement.

“O-Okay, leave it to me! My shop isn’t open right now, but I’m a butcher. Since you’re being kind enough to feed us, I’ll show you what I can do!”

“I’ll help too. As a former adventurer, I’m used to this kind of work.”

“Then I’ll cook once the meat’s been prepared! That’s my job at our restaurant, so let me handle that side of things.”

“All right, I’ll bring plates for the finished dishes to rest on. I have some big ones at home!”

They took the initiative and divided the work up amongst themselves, then eagerly went about carrying out their responsibilities.

“That’s right, work! Work if ya wanna eat! Soon, you’ll get to stuff yourselves full of so much food that you won’t want to eat ever again!”

All I did was stand around with my arms folded all important-like, barking shit like that while they put in the manpower. I thought my arrogance was well-earned, though, since I *did* provide the food itself. Just call me Daddy-Long-Legs. *Mwa ha ha ha ha! Keep it up, sheeple!*

Maybe it was because I was putting them to work, but while the newcomers were busy carrying out their tasks, even more people showed up to take a look. Every time the numbers went up, I would add a new batch of monster meat to our makeshift assembly line. That, of course, meant more work for these new folks, so things got louder. The noise brought in even more people, which meant I busted out even more meat. More helpers were here to prep it, and the cycle continued. It didn’t take long for the orphanage to start feeling like it was holding a festival.

Fat on various cuts of meat sizzled, sending up a savory aroma

that tickled the nose. Laughing voices fluttered through the air, and everyone was pouring each other drinks from liquor bottles someone had brought at some point. A troubadour had randomly arrived from somewhere and was proudly performing their songs to everyone's applause. And the children, probably because of all the food they'd gobbled down, were extremely lively, running around playing a game of tag. I'd taught them how.

Amongst all the rabble-rousing, I split my time equally between the drunk adults and the rowdy kids. I ate meat with the grown-ups and caused a ruckus with the little ones. The hero alternated between being at my mercy and the kids' as we took turns terrorizing her. Despite her worried expression, she did her damndest to watch over the little ones and make sure none of them got hurt. Nearby, Carlotta stood with her arms folded and a wry smile on her face as she took in our surroundings. Next to her, the woman who managed the orphanage beamed delightedly.

All the happiness surrounding the orphanage right now almost made the grave conditions in the royal capital seem like a lie. After all, food was a vital factor in bringing out people's humanity. It had an intimate relationship with the "living" part of "living thing." If it couldn't be secured, then one had no choice but to gamble their own life and fight for survival. For people to retain their higher sense of self and maintain composure, it was first necessary to satisfy the most basic driving force—hunger.

Incidentally, we didn't have to worry about that other thing plaguing the city. You know, the Undead. Allegedly, they weren't big fans of the sun, so they hid in dark places during the daytime. *Is that the reason there were so many down in the sewers?* Occasionally, one of them would get curious and roam around, but since we'd cut off the major source of their production, their population had taken a nosedive. It was extremely unlikely that they'd be spotted during the day anytime soon. The residents of the city might've also realized that the Undead's numbers were way down seeing as so many of them were gathered here.

"I caught you, mister! You're it!"

"Aw, boo. I got got. Mmm, then... Tag, Nell! You're it!"

"Huh?! I'm playing too?!"

"Run, you guys! She's it!"

The kids squealed with delight as they raced away with me through the orphanage's garden. With a confused laugh, the hero gave in and started chasing the scamps, yelling, "Ready or not, here I come!" Feeling more like a party than not since it'd grown a hell of a lot bigger than intended, the festivities continued into an early lunchtime. But then, something happened.

“What’s the meaning of this? The government is in charge of all food supplies. Haven’t you all seen the edict stating so?”

A group of four soldiers shoved their way through the crowd of people. All the joy in the air suddenly turned into tension. Everyone fell deathly silent, and their expressions turned angry and disapproving as they stared at the soldiers. Wasn’t hard to tell how they felt about the military and the government.

But the foursome headed straight toward the orphanage, which had become the heart of the ruckus, acting as if they weren’t the center of attention. Ya know, I hated to admit it, but I was kinda impressed by their attitudes. Like, what kind of hardass mental strength did they have to just walk right on past the angry citizens? And how could I get me some of that? *Credit where credit’s due.*

“Hmph. To blatantly disregard us, who have been fighting for the sake of our country, while you all eat so *awfully* well. Which one of you traitors hid these provisions from the nation?”

Just as I was about to get all up in their faces and show them what was what, Carlotta beat me to the punch, moving to stand in front of the men.

“‘Traitor,’ eh? *Awfully* bold of you to use that word. I’ll have you know that I hunted for this meat myself. Wouldn’t you agree, then, that it’s my right to do with it as I see fit?”

Confused as all hell, I turned to look at her. She glanced at me like she was saying to just let her handle these guys, then directed her gaze back at the soldiers. On my other side was the hero, who looked like she was really going through it. Though her posture was deceptively casual to avoid raising their suspicions, I noticed that she’d positioned herself so she could unsheathe her sword at any moment.

“This presents quite a problem considering the food shortage in our fair city. We need everyone’s cooperation in these trying times, so it’s exceedingly troubling to have you all dine in such a selfish way.”

“Truly? As far as I’m aware, the foodstuffs seized by the military have not been distributed fairly to the citizens.”

“Well, now, I can’t rightly comment one way or the other since I’m not directly involved in that. But I *am* certain that the country itself gave the order for food supplies to be collected as military resources. Therefore, we’ll now be gathering anything left here.”

At his ever-so-polite request, the people exploded with rage, heckling him with comments like “The hell you will!” and “We’re sick and tired of you all doing whatever you want!” But at his threatening glare, they quieted back down in no time.

“Right. How about you join us too, then? We’ll make sure to enjoy both you and this food *very* thoroughly. You wear a knight’s uniform,

but that delectable body would look much better in a whore's outfit."

The de facto leader of the soldiers leered at Carlotta without so much as an ounce of shame. His lackeys cackled like hyenas at the disgusting trash spewing out of his mouth. Didn't seem to matter to her, though. All she did in response was raise an eyebrow and cross her arms; she didn't say a word or lose her cool or anything. She must've understood how risky it would've been to make the situation worse.

But still, the fuck's the deal with these assholes? Were they really soldiers protecting the country? Because any way I looked at them, they were just punk-ass bitches with a bad case of small dick energy.

Actually, let's roll that back. I might've figured something out. My Demon-Lordy-Sense was telling me that the government was sending out misbehaving clowns-for-soldiers like these guys on purpose. They were great for fanning the flames of hostility with everyone in the city, including the citizens. If dickheads like them got someone else to throw the first punch, the higher-ups could use it as justification to attack so-called "enemies of the state" even more.

Think about it. Carlotta *had* mentioned that the Church was under surveillance. The military brass probably decided that our party gave them the perfect opportunity to subjugate the Church, so they'd known exactly what they were doing when they'd given these pissbabies their marching orders. Which meant that someone out there might be watching, waiting to see what would happen next.

On that note, I opened Maps to verify my theory, and...bingo. In a back alley not too far from us was a single hostile presence, lurking in the proverbial shadows. Okay, okay, now it all made sense why dipshits I so unreasonably and furiously wanted to murder had shown up. This was a trap designed specifically to rile us up. If they could make us strike first, they had all the pretext they could ever need. Then, hmm... Yeah, I'd just go ahead and eliminate that sneaky little fuck first. My mind made up, I moved to put my plan into action.

"Eek..."

One of the laugh-happy dipsticks smacked his arm into a little girl's bowl and everything in it spilled out.

"Shite, that's hot! You stupid brat!"

Of all the choices in the world, this wannabe thug just *had* to go with yanking his sword out of his sheath and raising it over his head. God forbid he consider that it was his own damn fault the stew had splashed on him in the first place. But, surprise! He didn't care about that. No, sir.

"Wha—"

Are these fuckers serious?! I was pissed now, so I gathered enough strength in my legs to easily stomp a massive crater into the ground,

then rushed toward the soldier at lightning speed. I'd moved so fast that you'd think I'd teleported. Having closed the gap between us, I punched the sword as hard as I could just as it was about to make contact with the little girl. There was a loud cracking sound, and the soldier's sword broke at its halfway point, pieces of it tumbling to the ground.

"Huh? Blergh—"

That was just the appetizer for our esteemed guest, who currently had zero clue what had even happened just now. Next, I took it upon myself to present him with the main course: a no-holds-barred roundhouse kick straight to his face. I made sure it sent him flying in a direction without people so no one else would get hurt.

Oh. Shit. It dawned on me that I'd just made a terrible move in this messed-up game. Too late now, though, huh? *Shit, balls, hell, and damn...* The battle strategy of "find an opening and take it" that I'd trained myself on in the Demonic Forest had taken over automatically, and as we could all see, I'd gone full steam ahead with that charge.

"Kh! You've done it now, you bastard!"

One of the remaining numbnuts soldiers reacted immediately, drawing his sword and swinging it at me. In too deep now to stop myself, I shifted my body, easily dodging his attack. Then, seeing my chance, I grabbed his head and slammed it into the ground, knocking him out cold. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw another gang member coming after me, so I readied myself to counter. But before I could even twitch, he mysteriously blasted off to the side. Who did I see standing where he'd been? The lady knight, Carlotta, her hands curled into fists.

"Hmph. Filth. You're not worth staining my sword on."

Huffing proudly, she shook off the blood clinging to her gauntlets.

"You worthless curs! How dare you beat us?! You'll pay for this soo— Hrngh?!"

"I, uh... I couldn't let you two outdo me, you know?"

The ringleader had been reaching for his sword while he'd screeched, but before he could do anything else, Nell had slipped in from a blind spot, whacking him on the back of the head with her still-sheathed holy sword. That fantastic wallop to his dome piece had put trash-boss there right the fuck to sleep. His legs collapsed and he went down hard, then stopped moving entirely.

"Huzzaaaah!!!"

With the last of the goons playing soldier down for the count, everyone roared so loudly that it felt like the air itself was shaking. I joined them too, letting out my own war cry. I punched both arms up high, ready to do a victory dance, but then I remembered that we didn't have time to celebrate.

“Sorry, but can you two take care of things here? Also, make sure you give the little girl a new bowl of beef stew.”

“Huh? Mr. Wye, where are you going?”

“The shit stain who was spying on us is running away like he stole something. I’m gonna go and *really* give him something to—”

That dot flashing on Maps was moving crazy fast. Dude was pretty light on his feet; he’d leaped off a wall and onto a roof, then bounded away like a goddamn kangaroo. I kinda wanted to ask him if he was some kind of ninja or something. *It’s not gonna end well for us if I don’t catch this guy.* I didn’t even finish what I was saying to Nell and Carlotta before I raced off after him.



“That man... He’s quite the skilled actor, wouldn’t you say, Nell? He so readily went along with your lie about him being your servant.”

Carlotta spoke while watching the direction the masked man had raced off in.

“Huh?! Y-You knew?!”

“Ha ha, of course I did. As if you could pull the wool over my eyes so easily.”

Carlotta knew that, due to her upbringing as a commoner, Nell wasn’t the sort to rely on servants and the like. The girl was very much used to doing everything herself, to the point that she insisted on it. So when she had suddenly brought along a man she claimed to be her attendant, Carlotta had been understandably suspicious.

A dead giveaway had been that Nell addressed him so politely as *Mr. Wye*. Referring to one’s servant in such a way was nothing if not abnormal. Carlotta had found it both amusing and true to form that the girl hadn’t realized her own slip of the tongue. Regarding that man himself, he hadn’t put any effort into behaving like a servant, which had led Carlotta to conclude that it wasn’t a character he was particularly committed to playing.

Carlotta glanced fleetingly at the spot he’d been standing in before rushing toward the villainous soldiers. A surprisingly large crater was gouged in the ground where his feet had rested. Creating such a thing wouldn’t have been possible without considerable leg strength.

Though she had certainly witnessed his talents during the previous night’s Undead attack, she had a feeling that she’d only managed to catch a glimpse of his true power. When he’d entered the Church’s hidden base, he had undoubtedly undergone their secret inspection, but that verification only extended as far as the examinee’s name and race, any malicious intent directed at the holy knights and their people, and particulars about the subject’s equipment. The process didn’t tell them anything about the individual’s strength.

Carlotta also had to admit that she couldn't be completely sure that they'd gotten his real name and race. Based on what she'd just seen of his offensive and defensive capabilities, she had no doubt that his power was close to hers and Nell the hero's—perhaps even greater. If she had to categorize him using the adventurers' hierarchy, it was very likely that he surpassed the Adamantite-class strength, reaching into Orichalcum-level.

That being the case, his mask was likely a means of concealing his true identity. He must have suspected that the masses would hound him incessantly were his true talents exposed. She could think of no other explanation as to why she had never heard of someone so powerful before. With the country in imminent danger, he'd probably felt compelled to lend a hand, thus he'd arrived here with Nell, albeit with his face hidden.

And as far as his character was concerned, Carlotta had accepted right away he wasn't a bad person. Part of the reason could be attributed simply to the fact that Nell had brought him along in the first place. She had faith in the girl's intuition about others. The other factor was how he had played with the children, quickly earning their vote of confidence.

She really wanted to invite him to ally with the Church. After all, he was a powerful person currently unaffiliated with any other groups. However, she knew that she needed to respect his will and right to live his own life. Not realizing the erroneous assumptions she was making about the masked man, Carlotta began to foster a sense of regard for him.

"B-But, um, Miss Carlotta, I-I didn't lie because he has an agenda against the Church or anythi—"

"I know. That man has a surprisingly virtuous spirit. He couldn't very well leave the capital alone in this crisis, so he's here even though he obviously doesn't want to reveal his identity."

"O-Oh, 'v-virtuous,' huh? W-Well, I guess you're not particularly wrong with that assessment."

Nell was bewildered by Carlotta's glowing review of a demon lord, but she couldn't exactly disagree with the woman either, so her response was decidedly vague.

"In any case, I won't be digging into his background at this point in time. We have more important things to focus on right now. Fi! Gwi!"

"Yes, Commander! At your service!"

At Carlotta's call, two knights stepped forward calmly, kneeling respectfully in front of the woman. Their faces were hidden by their helms, but their figures indicated that they were women.

"What an incredible man! He moved so quickly earlier that I

couldn't even follow his movements."

"Hmph. Well, you have no idea how much I wanted to kill that piece of garbage over there for insulting Commander Carlotta so atrociously."

Carlotta interrupted their mumbling brusquely.

"Enough with the pointless chatter. Now, listen up. It's time to commence our strategy. I want you to contact both the internal and external forces we have on standby. Give them the signal at once."

"Are you certain?"

"We've created too much of an uproar. If we wait until night to move, it may be too late. Go. Time is of the essence. We'll cause enough mayhem that we can use the confusion to storm the royal castle."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Giving that short but vigorous reply, the pair of knights left immediately to carry out their task. Watching them, Carlotta murmured to herself.

"Now, then. Seems it's my turn to act."

Once she'd organized her thoughts, she turned to the masses, still under the influence of a lingering zeal, and presented herself imposingly.

"My friends! I am Carlotta Demeyere, a holy knight with the Holy Order of Faldienne!"

At the sound of her dignified voice, the citizens all directed their attention at her.

"Look! This is what has become of our capital!"

She pointed derisively at the fallen soldiers no one had even tried to help up.

"They have revolted against His Majesty to take control of the nation! And they would rule as tyrants! If they're allowed to hold on to political power, it's easy to imagine what sort of future is in store for us! But we will not allow it! We will take back our city's destiny with our own hands!"

Spurred on by her words, the people roared exultantly. Was it their own ardor surging forth? Perhaps it was the mark of her powerful charisma? No matter the reason, not a single person protested the lady knight's call to arms.

"Heed me well! The Church will fight to return our capital to its former glory! If any among you are brave enough, join us in taking up arms! God's will is with us!"

"Yaaaahhh!!!"

Everyone raised their fists high into the air as they let out their loudest cheer of the day.

Side Story 1: Meanwhile, in the Dungeon

“Lady Lefi! Lady Lefi!”

“What is it, Lew?”

Lew spoke to Lefi with a mysterious grin on her face. Lefi responded with a puzzled expression.

“I’ve got an idea! Lady Lefi, you want to be closer to my lord, right?”

“Wh-Whatever is your goal in bringing up this topic so suddenly?!”

Her mistress’s blushing cheeks and agitated retort made Lew’s smile grow wider.

“Do you remember when you told us you weren’t sure how to work on your relationship with my lord?”

“I-Indeed I do... A-And what of it?”

“Well, I thought of something! While he’s not around, this is your chance to learn ways to bewitch him. Then, by the time he comes back, you can drive him crazy *and* close the distance between you two!”

Lew spoke aggressively, her fists clenched.

“Excuse me?”

“Um, Lady Lefi, can you please not look at me like I’m some pathetic numpity? S-Seriously, it’ll work! This strategy has all of my brainpower behind it, so it’s totally foolproof! I swear it’ll work!”

“Lew, I would like for you to understand that I am thoroughly perplexed by all of that which is currently happening here, the strategy notwithstanding.”

Unfortunately, Lefi’s words fell on deaf ears. Overflowing with confidence at her masterful plan, Lew merely waved her finger at the dragon girl.

“Just relax, Lady Lefi. I’m not alone today. Behold! I’ve invited a most esteemed professor to be our adviser!”

“I beg your pardon?”

“If you would, professor!”

At Lew’s call, who appeared was...Iluna, wearing a fake beard Yuki had bought for playtime and something called “eyeglasses,” a tool that apparently corrected a person’s vision. *Is she...imitating a schoolteacher?* Lefi recalled that Yuki had described one a while back.

Incidentally, the lenses in that particular pair of eyeglasses were unpowered. When Lefi had asked how that would improve one's eyesight, him responding that that was just how those ones were and that it would have been bad for everyone's eyes if they actually had a prescription had only served to confuse her even more. Not that it mattered. Not understanding that man had become second nature to Lefi, so regardless, she had automatically found herself responding with a simple "Hmm."

"Professor Iluna, please, I beg you to teach our lost Lady Lefi how to enchant my lord! Be her guide!"

"I fear that you two are the lost ones in this situation."

"Ahem! Lady Lefi—no, my student! Just listen to me, your teacher, and you can in-chant Yukiki perfectly! Um, Lew-Lew? What does 'in-chant' mean?"

"'Enchant' means to seduce a man and make him fall madly in love with you, Professor!"

"Ohhh, woow! It sounds like a super-special technique! Okey dokey! Now that we know what it means, Lady Lefi—wait, uh, what was it? Ugh, never mind, Lady Lefi it is! I'll teach you what Yukiki might like!"

"I see that nothing I say will make a difference, so I may as well resign myself to this exercise, hm?"

It was a bad habit of this dungeon's residents. Lefi wasn't sure if it was a result of its absent master's influence, but everyone here was so carefree and independent that things often got out of hand. When Yuki was here, he was the most carefree and independent of the bunch, selfishly doing whatever he wanted, whenever and however he wanted to. The others were relatively calm by comparison, but considering the present situation, despite his personality, that man certainly served as a most excellent mediator—or maybe not.

With a soft sigh, Lefi turned to Iluna and spoke.

"Fine. What, pray tell, might Yukiki like?"

"That's the spirit, Lady Lefi!"

"S-Silence."

Unconcerned about the other two's conversation, Iluna tapped her finger on her chin. With a "Hmm," she concentrated intensely on coming up with an answer to Lefi's question.

"Let's see... I know Yukiki likes lots of things, but... Oh, I got it! He likes fluffy things!"

"Fluffy things?"

"Uhhh, Professor Iluna? It's nice to find out about the things my lord likes, but that's not *quite* the 'like' we want to know about."

"Huh? But when Yukiki rubs Rir's floof his face looks in-chanted! Like he's having a really good dream!"

“I-I mean, you’re certainly not wrong about that. My lord *does* look like he’s melting whenever he strokes Lord Rir’s fur...”

“Indeed. His expression is that of a veritable imbecile whenever he pets Rir.”

With rueful smiles, Lefi and Lew couldn’t contain their laughter at Iluna’s befuddled expression.

“And, and, remember when he touched your wings, Lady Lefifi? He looked suuuper happy, so I think he likes to touch things that feel nice!”

“Th-Then...that means Lady Lefi can enchant my lord with her wings!”

“Lew. Was summarizing your conclusion so forcefully truly vital?”

Overwhelmed by the weight of Lefi’s reproachful gaze, Lew cleared her throat and, with a contrived smile, tried to smooth over her faux pas.

“Thank you very much for your instruction, Professor Iluna! If there’s anything else that comes to mind about Yukik—I mean, about my lord, please tell us!”

“You got it! I’ll teach you tons about him!”

With that, Iluna took her leave.

“All right, Lady Lefi, on to the next lesson. I’ll be calling your new instructor now.”

“What? There’s more?”

“Next professor, you’re up!”

At Lew’s haphazard request, the second to show up was...Shii, Iluna’s clone, right down to the fake facial hair and glasses. Lefi wasn’t surprised, though. She had spied Shii waiting in the wings in the spot Iluna had headed off to, so she’d already known who was going to appear next. In her mind, Lefi badly wanted to question if it was absolutely necessary to wear the glasses and beard. Even more than that, though, she wanted this farce to end sooner rather than later, so she kept her mouth shut.

“Professor Shii, as one of my lord’s foremost subordinates, please do tell us what gets him going!”

“Shii, you are aware that you need not go along with this idiotic performance, are you not?”

“Huh? It’s ’kay, Lady Lefifi! ’Cause this looks fun!”

Although she still wasn’t great at it, Shii was getting a lot better at speaking. Seeing the little girl beam so delightedly, Lefi smiled wryly to herself. *Well, no rescue from this quarter, so it is what it is.* Shii was a bit of a hedonist in the sense that she would participate in anything as long as it was fun. It was very likely that she thought of this as some sort of new make-believe game.

“Master look sooo happy when everyone having fun! So I think

best thing to do is having fun!”

“Beggging your pardon, Professor Shii, but we’d like to know what *excites* him. Something that packs an emotional punch, if you will...”

“‘Packs punch’? You mean something that touch his heart? Then what make him happy is wrong?”

“No, not at all. Happiness definitely strikes a chord, we’re just looking for something a liiittle different.”

“Hm? Then I dunno!”

“Oh. You don’t, huh? I see...”

Lew’s expression was indecipherable as she acknowledged Shii’s lively words. The little girl, meanwhile, had been grinning nonstop. Looking satisfied, she seemingly decided that she’d fulfilled her role. Without so much as a word, she scurried away to stand next to Iluna.

“M-Maybe this discussion was a bit too difficult for our young ladies here. Now, let’s pull it together and welcome our next lecturer!”

“I must admit that I find your unyielding determination in the face of such obstacles quite admirable.”

“I-It’s fine! We’re going to sweep the board with the help of our next contender! Last professor, please step forth!”

“Umm, I have a question. *Must* I wear these whiskers and corrective lenses?”

Thus, the final actor appeared: Leila, who seemed bewildered by the very items she held after Shii had passed them off to her. Following Iluna and Shii, who else would be left except her? It was the only reasonable conclusion. Of course, there were the wraith sisters Yuki had summoned, but it would have been impossible for them to play along since they couldn’t talk. *Hmm... Rude to Iluna and Shii though it may be, Leila is infinitely more competent.*

“Professor Leila! We would very much like to hear the thoughts of a seasoned academic such as yourself on this subject!”

“O-Oh, I really couldn’t. I’ve never studied psychology, so my only comments would be commonplace...”

Reluctantly putting on the fake beard and glasses, Leila mulled over what to say before finally speaking.

“Weeell...since Master Demon Lord is currently away, perhaps you can express your sentiments when he returns? Something like, ‘I was so lonely without you.’ Also, I remember reading somewhere that when keeping a gentleman company, it’s best to use subtle touches with him. You don’t want to be blatant or forward with your body.”

“H-How interesting... Finally, we’re getting ideas we can use. You certainly didn’t disappoint, Leila.”

“I see you have decided to take this seriously too, conscientious as you are...”

Lefi’s exasperated words were the catalyst for Leila’s abrupt

change in attitude. She snapped her mouth shut at once, going from slightly confused to her usual nonchalant expression.

“You’re right, I have. Then, by your leave, allow me to assist Lew further in her scheme, hm?”

“Excuse me? C-Cease this immediately, Leila! What reason could you have for suddenly becoming so enthusiastic?!”

“Because I would personally *love* to see you and Master Demon Lord strengthen your bond, Lady Lefi. Since he’s not here right now, it’s the perfect opportunity to think of more ways to close the distance between you two.”

“Agreed, Leila! With you on board, we’re practically invincible now!”

Lefi couldn’t deny the two young women. She understood that they were doing all this for her, thus leaving her unable to protest. Instead, she was carried along on the waves of their fervor as they instilled in her knowledge she didn’t quite grasp.

Chapter 2: To the Royal Castle

Wait, isn't this actually perfect? I was chasing after a man who was jumping from one rooftop to another like we were in some goddamn action movie. Then, just as I was about to make him settle his tab for all the trouble he'd caused me, that sudden thought had me abandoning my plan.

Right now, I was nice and far away from Nell and company. The whole time I'd been with them, I had been trying to find a good time to split because I knew they would've made me a part of their Church forces if I'd stayed. That would've totally tied my hands since I wouldn't have been able to act on my own. I hated the thought of not being a free agent, so this was my golden opportunity, wasn't it?

As far as I could tell, Jumping Jack was headed toward the royal castle. If I tailed him all the way there, he might even be gracious enough to lead me straight into the enemy's stronghold. Thanks to the scene we'd caused, even if I caught him right here and now, it was only a matter of time until his group heard about the Church's revolt. At this point, my best option would be to keep following him because there was a strong possibility that I'd learn something that I could use to my advantage.

Decision made, I dropped the idea of attacking Bounding Bob and kept my distance as I pursued his ass with Stealth active. I kicked off from one rooftop, flung my body through the air, and landed on the next one. To tell you the truth, I'd had a lot of close calls so far, almost falling off whenever I fumbled a step. Once I had the hang of it, though, I felt like I was doing parkour or something.

I'd thought about just using my wings and flying behind him, but decided against it on the off chance that someone saw through Stealth. Things would *not* end well for me if that happened. Being exposed in my so-called human form would be something I could weasel my way out of, but if my identity as a member of the demon species was revealed, this whole "disguising myself" operation to infiltrate the royal capital would end colossally meaninglessly. On God, I didn't want to see all my efforts wasted like that.

Ya know, on a related but also totally unrelated note, I had to wonder if I could still be considered a part of the demon species. When I'd evolved, my race had changed to Demon Lord, but did that still count as being in the demon species? Well, the category of demon

species was pretty broad. It included therianthropes who had both human and beast characteristics, not to mention demi-humans like dwarves and elves. Plus, I knew there were other races lumped into the demon species too.

The difference between demi-humans and other types of demons wasn't exactly clear, but what it more or less boiled down to was that races that were more humanlike than anything else were considered demi-humans. Any other hot-blooded, warmongering types were apparently classified as members of the demon species. Basically, "demon species" was a catch-all for the leftovers—the folks who couldn't be neatly slotted into other races. It made me imagine an incoherent mass of different peoples, which made sense to me and my very limited knowledge. Because of all the various folks defined as "demons," there was no uniform code of conduct or classification.

As a reminder, according to Lefi, demons were all meatheads for the most part, but they had two core groups: "fiends" and "winged." Both were supposedly crazy strong, and both lived under the philosophy of "power supremacy." Most other demons followed suit and took up the same "might above all" mentality.

Even knowing all that, though, demons as a whole weren't necessarily a combative species; there were races here and there that avoided fighting. Case in point was our very own Leila. She was definitely a demon, but she was also the furthest thing possible from a meathead. *Hmm, except that she is a major oddball, so that might just be her and not her whole race.*

Speaking of Leila, she'd told me about the current state of things in the demon world. Whoever was currently at the top of the pecking order had serious concerns about humans, who were constantly aggressing against them, becoming the conquerors of their world. They were putting together a cohesive demon coalition in response, which was actually a really smart move, with the first step in their plan having been to encourage cooperation between the beast folks and demi-humans who had been at each other's throats for a long time. All of that to say that though "demon species" was a set phrase, there was definitely a lot of variety to it. *I'd like to visit the demons' countries someday too.*

I continued to chase after my mark with those thoughts running through my head. He led me to the heart of the capital, then finally over near the royal castle. It was a huge, gorgeous, white-walled building that I'd been able to see even when I'd first entered the city. The thing was freaking majestic... *Hah. Suck it, losers.* In terms of both size and awesomeness, my castle easily took home the gold. Feeling like a big shot, I followed Vaulting Victor as he made his way closer to the castle. Eventually, he stopped jumping and made his way to the

ground. Instead of going in through the front gate, though, he used a backdoor set in a castle wall.

When he went through that entrance, I saw a sentinel standing guard inside. Hopping Harry opened the front of his hooded coat and pulled something out of his breast pocket to show to the guard—probably some sort of ID. With that little task complete, he started walking again, this time toward the door connecting to the castle's interior.

I leaped over the castle wall and landed just inside the side entrance, being careful not to make any noise. Then, I went back to shadowing Springing Sam. *The soldier guarding the back door...hasn't noticed me. Good.* I moseyed through the lawn and over to the door he'd gone through. Standing in front of it, I exhaled, caught my breath, and went to open it like I totally wasn't breaking and entering. *Huh?*

It. Was. Locked.

Of fucking *course* it was! The norm was to lock a door after opening it, right?! I mean, even *I* made sure to lock the front door whenever I left, for crying out loud!

"Huh? Who's there?"

Thankfully, luck just happened to be on my side. Leaping Lou, bless his heart, opened the door for me and peered out. Maybe he thought somebody had business with him when he heard it rattle. I didn't care, though. Worked out in my favor regardless.

"Ngh—"

Instantly, I roundhouse kicked him right in the head, sending him flying into the wall, where he bumped his noggin again. Unfortunately for him but fortunately for me, that double whammy had knocked him out cold before he'd been able to make a peep. His body flopped against the half-open door and slowly slid down it. I peeked inside to check if other people were around, and when I didn't spot anyone, I dragged the unconscious man inside and closed the door.

"Whew... Too close."

I muttered without thinking after letting out a quiet sigh. My original plan had been to take care of him by moving silently and *not* storming my way in. I would have avoided raising his defenses if I'd done it that way. Clearly, though, an amateur like me shouldn't be doing things he wasn't used to. I had *really* wanted to pull off a stealth mission like a certain snaky old man, but reality wasn't so simple.

Gotta say, though, sneaky snake guy was something else. He could execute his orders flawlessly while never being detected by enemies in close proximity, even when he *should* have been visible from the start! *He's just special.* That was the only explanation I could come up with for his perfection. So if a noob like me tried the same shit, he'd be

found out within seconds. For sure, for sure. *Yup, that old man is special.* I couldn't forget that ever again. *Actually, he's gotta have Stealth.* Yeah, that had to be it. Casting my ballot for that option.

"Okey dokey, artichokey, what's my next move?"

First, pat myself on the back for a successful gatecrashing. Second, admit I hadn't thought this far ahead. Don't act like that's even a little bit surprising, though. Flying by the seat of my pants literally and figuratively defined my entire ethos.

Huh. Well, at least I knew exactly what my goals were in the royal capital: to merc the ever-loving crap out of that shithead prince and put the king back in power so the country could go back to normal. Taking that into consideration, my priority needed to be rescuing the king. I'd had the same thought at yesterday's conference with the holy knights. I had a *lot* I wanted to talk to the guy about anyway, just the two of us. Plus, it'd be a real pain in the ass for me if he died and the prince's faction held on to power.

Putting myself in that asshole's shoes, my first plan of attack would be to off the king. Assassinating him would give the one-two punch of eliminating the "enemy's" leader and creating even more chaos. If the king got rescued, the prince's faction would lose all legitimacy to rule, so why they'd kept him alive was a freaking mystery. Maybe they were planning to hold a public execution? In any case, I didn't give a damn about their reasons, and I sure had no leeway to speculate. The most urgent thing on my list was saving the king, and if memory served, they'd tossed him in the dungeon.

"But how the hell do I get there...?"

Whispering to myself, I checked my surroundings. This specific room seemed to be part of a passageway because the only thing up ahead was a door. *Hmm... I don't have the time to interrogate this dude either.* Even if I did, I was pretty sure it would take hours to get him to talk. He was dressed like a spy, so I figured he was trained for stuff like that. Not to mention that I had no clue what interrogation techniques actually were, which meant I would probably end up killing him by accident. But, again, gore was not my jam, so that was out of the question. Period. End of story. I was almost positive I would end up psychologically damaging myself if I ever tried my hand at interrogation.

Eh, whatever. I'd start by making my way inside with Stealth still doing its thing. My best course of action now was to fill in Maps by prowling around the castle. Another option was for me to let loose a few of my Evil Eyes, those special little buggers I could use outside of the dungeon's territory, to help me explore the area better. I didn't have that many because they cost a pretty penny, but some were better than none. Settling on that plan of action, I grabbed the handle

of the door in front of me.



Angry shouts echoing and steel clanging against steel created a cacophony of noise. Added to that were the incessant sounds of things breaking. Holding her own in the clash of soldiers and citizens, Carlotta received reports from her subordinates.

“Commander, we’ve secured the west gate.”

“We’ve also secured the barracks, with several captives under our watch.”

“The front gate is currently seventy percent secured. It’s only a matter of time before it falls under our control.”

“Affirmative. Damage report?”

“Five dead and approximately six percent incapacitated, but I don’t foresee any impediment to our operation.”

Carlotta’s brow creased slightly at those counts.

“Tch. I thought I could keep our casualties lower than that, but... Though we took them by surprise, ultimately, our numbers were still no match for theirs.”

“Yes, I believe this much was inevitable. If anything, thanks to the civilians allying with us, we didn’t suffer as much damage as we otherwise would have.”

“You’re right. Hoping for anything more would be aiming too high, hm? I want the injured taken immediately to safety and placed on rest. We’re nowhere near finished, and I would rather not have them fall here.”

“Understood.”

It seemed that their strategy was proceeding smoothly. Though she didn’t let it show on her face, Carlotta felt a small measure of relief. As a result of the riots instigated by the city’s residents, great numbers of the enemy’s forces had rushed to quell the uprisings, conveniently leaving their strategic bases undermanned and insufficiently defended. Carlotta’s subordinates had kept an eye on the timing, and when the right moment hit, they’d sent a signal to the forces on standby in the interior. They had immediately commenced a strike on those various locations, setting in motion their plan to wrest control of the city from the enemy while they were confused.

As things stood, they hadn’t yet subdued all the sites and were only at the halfway mark of their strategy. That meant that while they couldn’t afford to let their guards down, things were moving according to plan, so there was room for cautious optimism. And though they were suffering losses to a certain extent, they were well below initial forecasts. So far, so good.

Everything seemed to be on track despite this part of the plan

having been cobbled together so spontaneously. Carlotta told herself that she really had to express her gratitude toward the masked man. Gathering the citizens as he had provided her and her forces with some much-needed help. She spoke with those thoughts circling in her mind.

“Next, I want to know what happened during the actual maneuvers. Were there any issues or unexpected changes?”

“There was one thing that troubled me. We verified the presence of several conjurers mixed in with the enemy soldiers.”

“Hmm... I’m almost certain that the country’s military included conjurers. Based on your tone, can I assume those conjurers are foreigners?”

“We’re still in the process of questioning prisoners, so I can’t give that a proper answer. If nothing else, I *can* tell you that those conjurers were not part of the capital’s garrisoned forces. It’s possible that they’re affiliated with His Highness’s supporters, or perhaps His Highness himself commissioned them as reinforcements from outside the nation.”

“Hmm...”

Carlotta pondered the information for a brief period.

“Drop dead, you wench!”

To a nearby enemy soldier, she seemed distracted at that moment, so he swung his sword her way. She was not, however, and blocked his attack with her sheathed sword without ever looking at him. Then, she used her momentum to counter with a single blow, all of which she did using only one hand.

“Gaaah!”

The man hadn’t been able to react to such an incredibly swift strike. It sent him flying, and when he landed, he lay unmoving. Not even glancing at the fallen man, Carlotta and her officers continued their conversation as if nothing of note had occurred.

“Commander, I’ve got a bit of info on those conjurers too.”

“Speak.”

“It happened after we took control of the area, but those vermin used Undead that were still moving to attack us. Pretty sure that makes ’em necromancers.”

Carlotta sucked in a sharp breath when she heard that news.

“Are you certain?”

“I saw the whole thing distinctly with my own eyes, I tell you. But it seemed to me that even the enemy soldiers hadn’t been aware that those conjurers were actually necromancers, because they sure screamed their lungs out when it all happened.”

“I see... His Highness’s hidden gems, hm? If what you say is true, then the Undead overrunning the capital were a reinforced secondary

army.”

“I don’t disagree with that, ma’am.”

In short, if they had failed in destroying the summoning circle the night before, there was a very high likelihood that the Undead army would have been attacking them in their current positions. Casualties would have exploded had that come to pass. The holy knights would have been able to manage one way or another with their specialized training, but with civilians involved in that situation... Carlotta couldn’t even bear the thought of it.

“Well, I knew that I would have to thank him, but now we’re truly indebted to him.”

An unexpectedly rueful smile surfaced on her face. Just as quickly, though, she relaxed her features once more before calling out to Nell. The girl, who stood in front of the masses, was doing her utmost to fight and defend.

“Nell! Status report!”

“Yes, Miss Carlotta! I’m fine! Ready for your next order!”

Unmatched by anyone else, the young hero relentlessly mowed down enemy soldiers. Her prowess inevitably garnered the citizens’ attention, and they cheered jubilantly for her, causing her to look somewhat embarrassed and bewildered since she wasn’t used to such blatant praise. Still, with a brief break in the action, she took the moment to reply to Carlotta.

“Then come with me. It’s time for the next stage.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

With that, they proceeded to execute the next phase of their battle plan.



The door opened with a creak.

“Hmm? Who’s—”

“Huh? H-Hey, what—”

It would’ve looked like it had opened on its own, which naturally had a guard standing on the other side of it suspicious. As he cautiously made his way over, I gave him a solid karate chop to the neck. Seeing his comrade fall so suddenly, the other nearby guard rushed over, so I generously presented him with a high kick straight to the chin. He passed out right away too.

The clanging of their armor echoed down the passageway as their bodies hit the ground. Nobody came running in, though, which meant there wasn’t anyone close enough to have heard anything. *All righty, then. Witnesses have been dealt with. Another win for Stealth.* Or, more accurately, what I liked to call—drumroll, please...Dynamic Stealth! A super-secret ability passed down through generations of all the

greatest of spies! Booyah! Damn right I mastered a new technique.

You'd think you wouldn't need to take an enemy down when Stealth was active, but you'd be wrong. If someone monitoring an area was already on high alert and they felt like something was off, or if they sensed some kind of dodgy magic in the air, or even if the person using Stealth moved too aggressively—anything like that made the ability less effective. So that was a critical downside of Stealth.

As this ability's level increased, it got easier for me to mask my presence. Unfortunately, though, it wasn't like Stealth actually made me completely invisible. Still, even if I hit the level cap at 10, I knew without a doubt that someone like Lefi would be able to see right through it anyway. The soldiers I'd just knocked out had been watching the door as part of their job, so if I *hadn't* done anything, they would've definitely found me out.

Back to the topic at hand, my infiltration of the castle was going absolutely swimmingly. Those two soldiers just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time to end up as victims of Dynamic Stealth. While I got my explore on, the Evil Eyes did their thing too. Together, we had Maps filling in with the castle's interior real nice. It wouldn't be long before I had a handle on every nook and cranny in the place.

I just had one *teensy* problem on my hands, though: I couldn't find a path to the dungeon, my first and most important target. I always used Maps, and I had no complaints, really—it was nothing if not super-duper handy—but the way it worked was that I actually physically needed to *see* an area to log it. Like, whenever I found a new door, I didn't know what was behind it, which meant that Maps didn't know either. And if Maps didn't know, there would be no dots blipping to warn me about enemies.

In short, I couldn't discover hidden passages with Maps alone. For that, my only option was to check out any shady-looking places with my own two eyes. It was possible that, as me and my dungeon leveled up, the mapping system would fill in automatically like in a video game, but that wasn't helpful *right now*. Right now, I was kinda stuck.

“Jeez Louise, this castle sure is a pain in my ass...”

It seemed like it was designed specifically to piss off invaders, with every single goddamn route being insanely complicated. Not to mention that they'd taken the opportunity to install some kind of magical contraption too. If I looked away from Maps for even a second, I would suddenly find myself right back where I'd started. I was almost positive that whatever mechanism it was had to be similar to my wraith Roh's mind magic. That *had* to be hellia inconvenient for the people living here. I'd think so, at least, but maybe they had a way to work around it?

Let me fire up the ol' noodle for a second here... They might be wearing or holding on to some kind of magical tool that negated the effect the magical trap had on them. After all, this was the country's royal castle, so it wouldn't be weird for its inhabitants to have equipment like that. Hitting on that idea, I rummaged through the soldiers' corpses—not that they were actually dead—using Analysis and... *Bingo! Go me.* I crouched down and pulled a thin, card-looking thing from one of the soldiers' inner pockets.

Authenticating Magical Tool: While in possession of this magical tool, the wearer will not be affected by the magical roadblocks installed in designated zones. Quality: C+.

These were most likely the IDs the soldiers here used. I saw a name and rank carved into it, so they were basically this world's dog tags. Which meant it functioned as a passport good for anywhere within the castle. Honestly, props to them. They'd clearly planned for this as part of the castle's design. *Welp, I'm just gonna borrow this, buddy, so thanks a bunch.* I shut down Analysis and stood back up.

Just my luck, a nearby door suddenly clicked open and a maid appeared.

“...”

“...”

The two of us stared at each other silently. You know the kind of song that plays when people's eyes meet without warning? Well, one of those was blasting in my head right the frick now. *Stealth...not on. Shiiii.* I'd been so caught up in searching the soldiers' bodies that I hadn't noticed it shutting off.

The maid's eyes moved away from me toward the fallen soldiers. Then, they tracked back to me, standing near them. She inhaled deeply.

“HEEEL—”

“The hell?! W-Wait, hang on!”

I covered her mouth with my hand as quickly as I could, cutting off her scream.

“Whoa, just calm down, okay? Please don't scream. Cool?”

The maid nodded vigorously. Her face was incredibly pale—probably because she thought I'd kill her or something if she didn't do what I said. Once I was sure she wouldn't try to scream again, I slowly took my hand off her mouth. When I did, she spoke with a shaky voice.

“D-Did you k-kill them...?”

“No, I didn't. Look closely. You can see that they're still breathing,

right?”

Well, it was almost impossible to tell because of their armor. Either way, she seemed to believe me because she looked kinda relieved.

“Listen up, maid. Not too long from now, shit’s gonna hit the fan here. If you don’t wanna get caught up in the mayhem, then I suggest you take your coworkers and escape fast.”

“M-Might you be here t-to rescue the king and his daughter...?”

“Huh? Uh, yeah, actually. That’s *exactly* what I’m here for.”

His daughter? So it’s not just the king who’s being held captive? At my answer, her attitude did a complete one-eighty, the look on her face going from slightly relieved to extremely grave. She grabbed one of my hands with both of her own.

“I-I’m begging you! Please, *please* save them!”

“Um, a-all right, I will.”

“The path to the dungeon is over there. I pray that you receive God’s divine protection.”

After that, thanks to the maid literally pointing me in the right direction, I found the way to the dungeon no problem. Didn’t get lost even once. Big ups to the dog tag thing I stole from one of the soldiers too. The sensation of it had been crazy weird, but having it on me made it feel like my field of vision had unexpectedly opened up. Plus, the confusing hallways had stopped giving me trouble. It was like I’d been given a key to a lock I’d been struggling to pick. I suspected that the magic traps set up were the kind that screwed with a person’s perception the moment they let their thoughts wander.

In any case, the path leading to the dungeon was outside, situated behind the castle in a shadowy place. No freaking wonder I hadn’t been able to find it inside despite hunting high and low for it. Two soldiers had been stationed in front of the dungeon, but they’d gotten the sneaky smackdown from my Dynamic Stealth. The perfect assassination if I said so myself. They weren’t dead, though.

I stepped over their bodies, then gave the sturdy door in front of me a push. It made a grating sound and...didn’t open. Not only that, but it looked like the guards didn’t have the key either. But that was a-okay because I totally, one hundred percent saw this coming. Yup, for sure. Since I had *definitely* prepared for this possibility, I forced the lock open. Of course, I was reeeal quiet about it. Didn’t wanna raise any alarms, dontcha know. My gift of foresight, yes, yes. Opening the door for real now, I took the stairs leading underground.

There was a sorta sour smell in the slightly chilly air. I took quiet steps, being careful not to make any noise as I headed down the stone stairs. Then, almost immediately, my super-enhanced demon lord

hearing picked up sounds and voices—blows being dealt over and over again, and muffled screams at different pitches as the hits got stronger.

“Hrgh! S-Stop, p-please...”

“Geh heh heh. Apologies, Princess, but His Majesty’s just too stubborn. So if ya wanna blame anyone, blame your tight-lipped old man, eh? Here’s another one!”

It was an unholy scene. Standing in one of the cells was a man with a straining bulge in a certain part of his lower body. He was panting like a dog, clearly lost in his sadistic dream as he violently punched and kicked a half-naked girl. *What a goddamn nightmare.*

“Stop it! Stop it, you villainous cur!”

In the next cell over, an old man dressed in expensive but heavily stained clothes was shouting his heart out. He’d obviously been beaten up too, but the hatred and rage in his eyes as he stared at the dirtbag were undeniable. Blood trickled down his face as he spoke through gritted teeth.

My emotions settled immediately. I knew exactly what I had to do. *Motherfucker signed his own death warrant.* I grabbed a dagger from Inventory and snuck up behind the sick son of a bitch who was still absorbed in getting his rocks off by torturing someone. With one decisive *whoosh*, I stabbed it right into his heart.

“Bwah...?”

“Have fun in hell, you depraved piece of shit.”

The evil bastard had never seen me coming, so his pervy, power-drunk expression didn’t change even with my knife sticking out of his chest and blood bubbling from his mouth. He dropped straight to the floor and died, just like that. I kicked the shit out of his stretched-out corpse, sending it flying across the cell like the heap of garbage it was.

In a corner, the little girl had curled up into a tiny ball, desperately trying to protect herself. I walked over, knelt down next to her, and opened up my Inventory rift again, this time pulling out a Super Potion. Then, I carefully started pouring it on her countless wounds. *Shit, dude. I wanna hurl.*

“S-Sir Hero, i-is it over...?”

She had flinched in fear for a second when she saw me, but after seemingly deciding that I wasn’t going to hurt her like that rat had, she asked me that question. Even her eyes were pleading with me.

“Yeah. Everything’s fine now. You were very brave.”

I gently patted her head. My response transformed the expression on her face into a genuinely peaceful one. And then she passed out.

“Who... Who are you...?”

The man in the cell next door looked super relieved now that this little girl, who seemed to be his daughter, had been saved. At the

same time, though, confusion at the sudden turn of events was clear in his voice. I finished using the Super Potion on the girl who'd been stripped half naked and placed a blanket, which I'd grabbed alongside the medicine, over her unconscious body. Then, with a long exhale, I turned to face the other cell.

“Sup, King?”

I smirked from behind my mask as I said that to the *country's literal ruler*. Analysis showed me that he was most definitely the king, and the little girl was the “his daughter” the maid had mentioned. Now I understood her desperation and that serious expression on her face. She'd known what was happening here but hadn't been able to do anything to help.

“As for me...well, I'm *this* kind of guy.”

After glancing at the girl to make sure she was still asleep, I sprouted my wings with a flutter, showing them off to the king.



“Wha— You’re a demon? Did you decide to use the upheaval to your advantage and take my head as a prize? Alas, killing me would be meaningless.”

The king replied with a self-deprecating sneer.

“I already know that, though I never planned on killing you anyway. If I’d really wanted you dead, you would’ve been dust in the wind a long time ago. Believe it or not, I’m here to save you, so some thanks would go a long way.”

“A demon would do that...?”

“Sure would. I’m part of the demon species, but it’s not like I’m any one demon’s bloodhound. I’m a demon lord. I live in the Demonic Forest.”

“Ah. I see now. You’re *that* one...”

At my response, the king’s gaze sharpened. I could see in his eyes that he knew exactly who I was. And for as downtrodden as he seemed, I caught a glimpse of a powerful personality in his expression—the type that was necessary to govern an entire nation.

“Now I am all the more perturbed by your presence. Why would a man like you travel such a great distance here?”

“It’s not like I’m here ’cause I wanna be, but there are too many goddamn idiot humans who think they can mess with my territory. When I found out that the ringleader just so happened to be this country’s crown prince, I figured I’d swing by to take him out. To ensure the tranquility of my home, ya know? Then everything happened with this city, so here we are now.”

My extremely exasperated tone made the king laugh quietly.

“Mm, that’s quite a disaster indeed. I understand your anger. That imbecile son of mine *did* end up attacking you...”

“You really need to work on disciplining him better. I’d be mega pissed if the prince’s allies managed to hold on to political power at this rate. Do you have any idea what a hassle it’d be to fend off another human invasion? I need you back on top, taking the reins over humans again. Hence I’m rescuing you.”

“I see. Your logic is quite straightforward. However...”

Sounding exhausted, he walked away from the iron bars separating us. Then, leaning against the opposite wall, he slowly fell to the floor.

“I...am a foolish king. Though I noticed my son’s behavior growing increasingly erratic, I could do nothing to stop it or him, and now, we find ourselves where we are. You believe that a man like me truly holds the power to hold sway over the citizenry?”

“I don’t know. But I *do* know that if you can’t take control, I’ll kill countless humans in this nation. Your shit-for-brains son wants my

land *real* bad, but as the one inhabiting said land, I can't let that happen. You know, since he's ruining my peaceful life and all. So I'll kill, no hesitation whatsoever."

"In short, you're telling me to fish or cut bait."

I shrugged.

"Basically, yeah. Plus, the people themselves want you reinstated to power. Because of that, the Church's knights and their allies are planning to storm the castle tonight to rescue you."

"The Church?"

The king looked puzzled.

"I don't know what exactly their deal is in all this, so you got me there. They definitely seem to be against the prince's faction, though, since they're sure they would suffer serious damage if he and his supporters stay in power. Thus, your rescue strategy. So if you plan on just taking it easy and spending the rest of your life in this dingy jail, the world's still gonna keep moving on without you. The cornered rat will bite the cat, as they say. Doesn't matter what *I* do or don't do."

My words got him thinking. After mulling everything over for a while, the king finally took a full, deep breath. He stayed quiet for just a few more seconds.

"Well, I suppose a parent must sort out the aftermath of the crimes committed by their child, mustn't they?"

He pulled himself to his feet, standing up straight. When he faced me—directly this time—not an ounce of his weariness was left. Instead, his eyes shone brightly.

"So be it. Would you kindly free me from this place?"

"Of course. Uhhh, one thing first, though, just so we're both clear. If you try to go against me or whatever, I'll kill you on the spot along with anyone who sides with you. You wouldn't want that to happen, right? Since it would devastate this kid and all."

My attempt to intimidate the king resulted in him smiling, for some weird reason.

"What? If you've got something to say, say it."

"No, I simply thought that, in this situation, a normal person would have threatened to kill my daughter instead."

I was literally stunned speechless. I could definitely imagine my expression right now, like I'd just swallowed the bitterest of bitter pills. Definitely played myself there.

"Good grief. It strains the imagination to have my daughter's hero be a demon lord. This could be straight out of a play, all things considered. Ah, I forgot to say one thing."

"Spit it out, then."

At my prodding, the king of this country...bowed deeply to me. I couldn't emphasize how low he went. He freaking *bowed*. To *me*.

“Thank you for saving my daughter.”

The look on his face was that of a father. Nothing more.

“Hmph. I just didn’t like what I saw. Anyway, we need to get out of here fast. I can’t be assed to deal with reinforcements if they come here ’cause we stuck around too long.”

With that, I grabbed the iron bars of the king’s cell and twisted them far enough apart for someone to slip through. At almost the exact same time, my overpowered demon lord ears picked up the faint sounds of chaos echoing from above us.

Did they find the soldiers I knocked out? Eh, whatever. Since I’d completed my most important mission, I didn’t even need to hide myself using Stealth anymore. From here on out, I’d make damn sure to unleash all the frustration that had built up inside me. Grinning like a madman behind my mask, I opened Inventory and pulled out my newest best friend, Zaien. Time for its long-awaited debut.

Candlelight reflected off its red blade. Using the sword in an enclosed space like this would be nearly impossible, but once we got out of this dungeon, it was game on. I could finally swing it around to my heart’s content. I could *feel* how happy Zaien was to be seeing the outside world. *Sheesh, how much cuter can you get?*

Actually, maybe the sword was just excited to get to drink its enemies’ blood. But then that would mean its personality hadn’t changed all that much from when it was a cursed magic blade. Hmm... Well, if nothing else, it wasn’t trying to devour people into its curse like it used to, so I’d take that as a win. Positive thinking.

Oh, this was totally, completely, a thousand percent unrelated to my current situation, but just as a note, the mask I was wearing right now wasn’t one with a hole in the mouth. It was the full-face version this time, one that hid my whole entire mug. I’d swapped it out as a precaution before sneaking into the royal castle. I couldn’t say why, but I found myself seriously preferring this one. Feel me?

“You can walk, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’ll carry your daughter while I clear the way for us.”

Without missing a beat, the king went through the gap I’d created in the iron bars and made a beeline for his daughter. He bent down to pick her up before turning back to me.

“All of her wounds are gone. It must be that elixir’s doing, then?”

“Huh? ‘Elixir’? No, just a normal Super Potion.”

“Hm? But that’s an elixir, is it not? Products like it are still so rare on the market, and yet you used such a valuable item on my daughter. Truly, the depth of my gratitude knows no bounds. Please allow me to reward you suitably later.”

I couldn’t control the look of astonishment on my face as the king

spoke. *D-Daaamn...* Things finally clicked in my wrinkleless brain. I'd been tricked by the name Super Potion itself. No, more like I'd just stupidly misunderstood Lefi a while back when she'd told me that "It would be wise for you to keep a vial of it on your person." I had just assumed from her smart-ass tone that anyone who did any sort of fighting in this world carried at least a few of the things around, but I couldn't have been more wrong. These puppies were actually majorly rare and expensive. No freaking wonder I'd always been impressed by its insane effectiveness. *Now I know, damn.*

That was fine by me. Like hell was I gonna complain; them being super effective was anything but a problem. As long as they were useful, it didn't matter what their origin story was. That said, moving forward, I needed to not be so reckless about using them outside the Demonic Forest. Shit, was I actually gonna have to *think* before I leaped? A wry smile on my face and those thoughts running through my head, I led our merry little gang—the king carrying his daughter—up toward the commotion, which was getting louder.



"Bwah ha ha ha! Time to steamroll you clowns!"

Swish and flick. Swish and flick. Rinse and repeat over and over again. That was how I was laying waste to the soldiers that kept coming at us. Wouldn't you know it, my prediction had been right on the money. The soldiers I'd left behind, the ones who'd been sacrificed on Dynamic Stealth's altar, had been discovered. A group of their comrades running around outside had seen us as we left the dungeon earlier. Since then, they'd hunkered down in disorganized battle formations and were fighting us nonstop. Something was off about these guys, though.

"Nooooo! He got meee!"

"Help! I'm hurt! Medic! I need a medic!"

Every time I swung at them, the soldiers helped me out by launching themselves away of their own volition. My sword shouldn't have so much as *grazed* them, but they still went flying. I couldn't quite put my finger on what the hell was going on, but they pretended to get got and tumbled dramatically—but still realistically, mind you—to the ground.

Whenever I made eye contact with one of them, they would signal back to me with a very slight nod. *Ohhh, snaaap.* I just had my very own light bulb moment. Basically, they were telling me that not everyone in the military was on the prince's side. Oof, which meant it might've been my bad for knocking out those guys on my way to the dungeon. *Forgive me, dudes.* I'd run into them right after my encounter with the scumbags at the orphanage, so I'd painted all the soldiers

currently in the city with that same brush. *Note to self: treat them to meat later.*

“You watching this, King? Seems to me you’re pretty damn well-liked.”

“Indeed...”

Seeing the sight before him, the king gave me a nod, obviously reflecting on the soldiers’ actions. As for me, I was making sure to use the back of my sword and less than a fifth of my usual strength to wave Zaien around. I did laugh like a maniac the whole time, though, playing my part in this spectacle just like the soldiers.

“Goddammit, you swine! What are you doing?! Capture them! Capture them at once!”

That shouting came from a man who looked to be a commanding officer. The arrogant tool was standing farther away than everyone else, and his scream made it pretty clear that he was fed up with what was going on. He directed his rage at his subordinates, his ranting aggressively shaking the sword hanging at his hip. *Hm... He’s not like the rest of them.* That meant he was fair game.

Having made my decision, I landed in front of him with a single jump. Using the momentum from that, I drove my free hand, which I’d curled into a fist, right into his solar plexus.

“Hurry up and—hrmph?!”

His armor made a gnarly crunching sound as my punch crushed it. This dipshit of a CO blasted a hysterically far distance backward before finally hitting a wall with a vicious thud. Then, he slumped to the ground, unconscious.

“Ohhh nooo! The commander’s been defeated! Evacuate! We must evacuate!”

Their words were perfect for our little show, but their tone sure wasn’t. They sounded almost ecstatic. To really sell the whole act, they were dragging some of the “wounded” away like they were actually seriously hurt and supporting other ones with their shoulders. They retreated so quickly that an unsuspecting bystander would have thought they were escaping from an actual life-or-death situation.

I couldn’t stop myself from cracking an embarrassed smile as I watched them book it out of here. Dollars to DP, they were enjoying themselves too.

“Ah ha, right. Okay, then... Hey! Hey, you! I’ve got you now! This makes you my captive!”

“Understood! I have just been captured and turned into a captive, so it’s inevitable if I inadvertently reveal something while being interrogated.”

Immediately guessing what I was up to, Mr. POW replied pretty enthusiastically.

“I need info. Where’s the prince? And what about the soldiers aligned with the prince’s faction? Tell me everything you know about their movements.”

As much as possible, I wanted to be able to differentiate between allied and enemy soldiers.

“His Highness will be in either his office or the audience hall. His Highness’s attendants and supporters are headed toward the city itself to suppress the riots occurring just outside the castle. A few in his camp still remain within the castle grounds, but we’ll have them in hand.”

They’re suppressing the what now?

“What do you mean by ‘riots’?”

“It seems the Church is leading the efforts, collaborating with the residents to create chaos within the city. Since the beginning of the rebellion, we have been under surveillance by a sect of the prince’s faction. They deliberately forced us to stay here in order to avoid us betraying them outside the castle. Thanks to your timely intervention, however, we can finally make a move of our own. We are all deeply grateful to you.”

“Uhhh, you’re welcome? Don’t even worry about it. I... Same here, I guess. I’m on a mission too, and I won’t stop until it’s done.”

The hamster wheel that was my brain kept on spinning while I talked to my not-hostage. Did they push the timetable up for our battle plan because of the shit that went down at the orphanage? That had to be it. Carlotta must have realized that we’d end up one step behind if we waited, so she used the public’s energy to our advantage and fired them up even more. The absolute freaking cojones on that woman despite being a holy knight. Slow clap, long clap, all the claps, hot damn.

No biggie, though. If I remembered right, the original strategy had been for the detached force to draw the enemy’s attention with their rabble-rousing, which would allow the rescue team to invade the castle. Since only the schedule had changed because the rabble-rousing had blown up way more than anticipated, Carlotta and company would definitely have capitalized on the opportunity to move in. In other words, the rescue team should be here soon anyway.

All right, I’ll hand the king and his daughter off to the rescue team. Once I did that, I could finally go murder the fuck out of the crown prince. I had a feeling he’d slip right out of my grasp if I gave him any more time.

“I think I’ve got a handle on everything now, so thanks again for the information. I’ll definitely take the king...His Majesty to a safe place. You all be careful not to overdo it, hear?”

“Yes, sir! May the fortunes of war favor you as well!”

Mr. POW bowed to the king and saluted to me before withdrawing with his comrades.

“Okay, King. Won’t be long until the rescue cavalry arrives. I want you to take your daughter and escape with them.”

“May... May I ask you something?”

“What’s up?”

“Do you plan to kill my son?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

“Do you, now...?”

When I agreed, the king closed his eyes. After some time, he slowly opened them again, appearing determined.

“In that case, might you take me with you?”

“Sorry, but I’m gonna kill him whether you’re there or not.”

’Cause that’s what happens to dumbasses who try to mess with my peaceful life.

“Even if you choose to grant him leniency, he committed treason against our nation. Death is inevitable, which is precisely why I would like to be there myself—to send him off in his final moments.”

Leave it to a parent to think like that.

“You better not get in my way.”

“I understand. I will be sure I don’t interfere.”

I sighed softly.

“Your Majesty?! And you’re...”

“Mr. Wye!”

After our brief discussion, I’d led the way out of the castle with the little princess still asleep in her father’s arms. Nobody had stopped us as we went out the back of the castle and headed toward the front, where we ran into a group of eight making their way toward us pretty quickly. I was honestly so stoked to see them I could have kissed the ground. Leading the pack was the lady knight, Carlotta. Next to her was the hero. *So this is the rescue team, huh?*

“Hey, Nell. Fancy meeting you here.”

I could understand Carlotta being the front line commander, but seeing Nell with her really drove home how vital the hero was as a battle asset to the Church. Why? Because they had deliberately included her on the mission to rescue the king, which had been their highest priority. That was how much faith they put in her fighting ability.

“Mr. Wye, why are you here?”

“Well, I guess you could say that’s just how things ended up. It’d take too long to give you all the details.”

“Save the questions for later, Nell. I have many things to ask as well, but we’re in the presence of His Majesty now, so act

accordingly.”

While Carlotta scolded Nell, she and the rest of the unit faced the king and knelt down.

“Your Majesty, we are so relieved to see both you and Her Highness safe.”

“Indeed. Now raise your heads. This is an emergency; there’s no need for such formalities.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

Instantly, they all proudly got to their feet, like mountains standing tall. As I watched this all unfold from right next to the king, I whispered in his ear.

“I’m friends with these guys, but they don’t know my true identity, so don’t let it slip.”

He tilted his head slightly in agreement. Of course, Nell knew I was a demon lord, but probably for the best that the king didn’t find that out either.

“Well, then, Your Majesty, it is urgent that we evacuate at once.”

“No, I won’t be going with you. Just take my daughter.”

“I beg your pardon?”

For an instant, Carlotta looked well and truly shocked. She must not’ve expected the king to refuse.

“You will be going after my son, yes? Then I will follow as well.”

“B-But, Your Majesty...”

“I realize I’m being unreasonable. Still, I humbly ask that you grant my request.”

The king’s unexpected stubbornness seemed to have Carlotta at a loss.

“P-Please wait, Your Majesty. We came here for the express purpose of rescuing you. It would be unconscionable of us to deliberately bring you to a battlefield.”

“I certainly understand your concerns, just as I understand that I’m being selfish. But this is something I *must* do, you see.”

“I beg you to reconsider—”

Their argument came to an abrupt end courtesy of some asshole who was most definitely trespassing.

I’d kept my Scout ability going ’round the clock since reaching the royal capital, and it suddenly started going off. Same thing happened with Danger Detection, which I’d picked up a little while back. I’d figured it wouldn’t hurt to have since it seemed useful. This particular ability changed how it reacted based on how much danger I was in.

For example, whenever Iluna got mad and started throwing cute little punches and kicks at me, Danger Detection was dead silent. If *Lefi* blew a gasket and tried to end me with *her* cute beatdowns,

though, Danger Detection practically blared air raid sirens through my whole body. As the ability leveled up, its range and precision got better.

The warning it was giving me right now was nowhere near Lefitantum-level, but the fact that it was warning me at all meant that the enemy *was* at least kinda dangerous. If there was one thing I'd learned from training in the Demonic Forest, it was to not ignore this sort of thing. I'd wound up in a world of hurt plenty of times by being a step too slow. Remembering the lesson I'd learned the hard way, I got counterattack-ready by resting Zaien on my shoulder. I analyzed what Scout and Danger Detection were both telling me, then, with a *woom*, I swung Zaien up toward the sky.

Crash! Instantly, the impact traveled through the sword and sent a shock wave through my arms. My guess was that this opponent had come jumping down from somewhere up in the castle. I had to admit that it was a solid blow; it honestly might've broken my defense if I hadn't been prepared for it.

"Oh ho! Just what do we got here?! Ya blocked my attack, ya whoreson!"

Some dude had dropped into sight. He was all smiles and his weapon was, of course, drawn. Age-wise, he looked a little over thirty. He had a handful of scars across his body, so it was obvious that he lived and breathed fighting.

"Nh! Damn straight I did! Getting my ass whooped isn't exactly a hobby of mine!"

I aimed both that quip and a hard kick his way. The intruder evaded it like it was nothing, whooshing away to put a ton of distance between us. When he landed, he immediately took up a fighting stance.

"Heh heh heh. I picked up an absolute shitter of a commission on the off chance I'd get ta cross swords with the Church's famous lady knight and hero, but it seems fortune favors me even more'n I imagined. Damn me fer gettin' here later'n the pests."

The man had a crazed look in his eyes, and the grin he was wearing was just as deranged. No doubt he was seriously enjoying himself. *Ugh, just great. I don't wanna deal with this. Now what?* This guy was for sure one of those fight-seeking psychos.

Based on his gear, I could tell he wasn't some cut-and-paste soldier. Would've been awesome if it just *looked* high-end, but Analysis said that it was good stuff, so no such luck there. Also, he mentioned a commission, meaning he was either a mercenary or an adventurer. Either way, him showing up had everyone here super on edge.

"M-Mr. Wye! Are you hurt?!"

“I’m fine, but I need y’all to wrap up your conversation, like, yesterday.”

More bad news for me: it looked like this happy-go-fighty mofo thought I was worthy of being his opponent. Like, the dude never so much as glanced at anyone else. He honed in on me like a targeting laser, sword in hand and not moving a muscle. I knew just from that that there was no point running away—this nutcase would just chase after me.

For fuck’s sake, why can’t I ever catch a break? I’m a pacifist, people! I fought only when I had to, not because I liked doing it.

At that moment, a member of the rescue squad snuck up close to Fighty McFightface with some sick ninja moves and slashed at him from a blind spot.

“I don’t remember invitin’ no small fry ta meddle in mah business.”

A single flash of his sword. That one casual move had our comrade’s upper and lower halves going their separate ways, never to meet again. This new state of affairs had Carlotta clicking her tongue in aggravation before immediately giving out orders.

“Mask! Do you need us to cover you?!”

“No. You’ll just get in my way.”

If I had to use one word to describe my greatsword, Zaien, it’d be “huge.” It had such long reach that if I had to worry about where my allies were, I wouldn’t be able to swing it around as freely as I’d like. That went double since I was actual dogshit when it came to swordsmanship. In the event backup stuck around, I was a thousand percent confident I’d end up hacking at them too. Friendly fire, just with a sword.

It would be one thing if the hero or Carlotta stayed behind since I knew what they were capable of, but anyone else made this powder keg of a situation way more powder keg-y. I didn’t have the time or energy to account for that, so as much as I hated the idea of fighting this loony one-on-one, it was the easiest option I had.

“Message received. Orna! Duo! Take Her Highness to safety and withdraw. The rest of you, with me! We’re going to seize the prince. Your Majesty, under no circumstances should you leave our side!”

“Yes, Commander!”

“Understood.”

“Well, then, Mask, I leave this in your capable hands! I still have many, many things to ask you, so do me a favor and don’t die!”

“B-Be careful, Mr. Wye!”

“You got it.”

I replied while staring at the wacko in front of me. The ladies nodded in acknowledgment, then left to take care of their own

business. Finally, it was just me and McFightin’.

“You sure you’re good with letting the king escape? He *was* your commission, wasn’t he?”

“I could give a rat’s ass. He weren’t in the contract anyway. Mah contract clearly states that mah job is to eliminate strong folks, ’n I figure yer the strongest here. Ahhh...really am a lucky man, ain’t I? Never woulda guessed I’d get the chance ta meet such a terrifyin’ enemy. This must be mah reward for bein’ on mah best behavior every day, eh?”

The guy had a look like a lovesick maiden while he spoke. Words couldn’t describe how freaking *gross* it felt to have a *dude* look at me like that. I wanted him to stop. I would pay good money for him to stop. *Please, no. I hate this.*

“From what I’ve seen of you, I’m gonna have to call bullshit on that one!”

While I spat those words in his face, I kicked off the ground. My body rocketed through the air as I swooped toward him.



“...”

“Are you worried, Nell?”

When the lady knight Carlotta posed that question to the hero standing next to her, the young girl hesitated for a beat before nodding her head.

“How could I not be? That man was definitely an Adamantite-class adventurer, right?”

Currently, the operation to attack the castle’s interior was going incredibly well. Carlotta and the holy knight brigade had been fully prepared to receive a less than warm welcome from the military since they were assaulting their country’s one and only royal castle, but once they had actually put their plan into action, they realized that there wasn’t any real hostility directed at them. If anything, more than half of the castle’s forces were assisting them in subjugating the crown prince’s soldiers.

The holy knights had been well aware that there were still military members who swore allegiance to His Majesty. It was quite difficult to distinguish between those people and the prince’s supporters, however, so Carlotta and her team hadn’t counted on finding any allies. They were happy for that to have been a miscalculation.

The smoothness of the operation could also be attributed heavily to the armed uprising instigated by the civilians. Their resentment had built and built to the point that they had been more than willing to help the knights. With them lashing out so violently, a good chunk of

the prince's dogs at the castle had been forced to head into the city to suppress the rebellion, eliminating obstacles in the knights' favor.

It was certainly true that Carlotta had fanned the flames of said armed uprising, but if rousing words coming from a pretty face were enough to defeat the enemy, then she was in no position to complain. She would utilize any and every tool at her disposal to succeed. Her combat capabilities were undeniably outstanding, but that flexibility of thought had also been a significant factor in Carlotta's appointment as commanding officer.

Case in point was their primary mission of rescuing the king. The Masked Man's role in the plan had been to subdue any enemy personnel placed on surveillance duty, yet for reasons Carlotta couldn't fathom, he had instead gone ahead and rescued His Majesty. He had easily accomplished what should have been the most difficult part of their strategy.

Of course, Carlotta had to take this change to their situation in stride. The headache she now had to deal with was the object of their rescue, the king, insisting that he accompany them. With his demand, Carlotta and her squadron were at such a loss that they almost questioned why they had even stormed the castle in the first place. But there was nothing any of them could do. After all, they couldn't very well deny His Majesty.

What she truly wanted to do was scream, "We need to escape *now!*" in His Majesty's face. No matter how strong that desire was, though, she could keenly sense how determined he was. It would be nigh impossible to change his mind at this point. So be it. Henceforth, their only option was to protect him, even if it meant sacrificing their own lives.

There was one more problem that Carlotta had misread, and a massive one at that: the man who'd attacked them earlier. That man, whose arrival had the hero in distress, belonged to the adventurers' guild. The guild had taken a firm neutral stance on the current upheaval, intent on avoiding any sort of intervention. As such, Carlotta had concluded that, at the very least, they wouldn't dispatch adventurers to aid the enemy's side. It was possible that her faith in their word might have been misplaced, however. In hindsight, perhaps her outlook had been a bit too naive.

"Well, considering the glimpses Mask has shown us of his abilities, I would venture to say that he'll put up quite a good fight. And if that sword he was shouldering is his weapon of choice, then just as he said, our presence would have been a hindrance even if we'd stayed behind as support."

"Hm... That's true..."

That massive sword, with its uniquely curved, single-edged blade

was such a beautiful shade of red that it instantly captivated all who beheld it. Considering its size, any allies would definitely get in its way as it swung around. Carlotta could easily envision a scene where it cut down everyone within its range, enemy and ally alike. To avoid that sort of situation, she had no choice other than to let him handle it. Still, though, she understood Nell's concerns all too well.

Anyone even remotely familiar with those in combat roles would recognize the face of the man who'd charged at Mask. His alias was War Freak, and unfortunately for the members of the adventurers' guild, he made his presence known on every battlefield, marking himself as their veritable problem child. His class was Adamantite, but if he were to manage to improve his conduct some, a promotion to Orichalcum was well within his reach. Some even said that he stood on the threshold of Hero. For those reasons and more, the guild couldn't simply expel him. It wouldn't be an understatement to say he was one of the best fighters around.



“Hrgh!”

I twisted my body just enough to evade Fight Guy's sword slash. Then, I returned the favor by swinging Zaien at him. Between its weight and my mighty demon lord body, my attacks packed some major punch. My opponent had figured that much out by now, though, so rather than meeting my slash head-on, he skillfully parried it. Missing its mark, Zaien slammed into the lawn and kicked up a bunch of dirt.

From there, I attempted to chase the sumbitch down one more time. That plan was quickly foiled when his sword, almost wiggling like a living thing, tried to cut my fricking head off. I jumped back just in time to dodge it, clicking my tongue as I did.

“Geh heh heh, yer power ain't nothin' to laugh at! 'N them's some quick reactions! Mah hat's off to ya, Mask!”

“Shut *up*, man! Stop looking at me with those disgusting bedroom eyes! I've got goosebumps on my goosebumps!”

While screaming insults at him, I flipped him the bird with the hand that wasn't holding my sword.

Name: Regulus

Race: Human

Class: Sword Devil

Level: 84

HP: 2,031 / 2,331

MP: 1,018 / 1,018

Strength: 704

Stamina: 703
Agility: 767
Magic: 398
Dexterity: 1,122
Luck: 105
Special Abilities: Indomitability, Adversity
Abilities: Swordsmanship 7, Unarmed Combat 4, Scout
4, Danger Detection 5
Title: Battle Maniac, Sword Maniac, Adamantite-class
Adventurer, One Who Walks the Line Between Life and
Death

This guy was no joke. Even though my stats were a little better than his, there was a massive gap between our Swordsmanship ability levels. I didn't have time to check out the details of his Special Abilities either, but if I took the names at face value, they probably meant that he was strongest when he was on the verge of death.

Our swords had clashed more times than I could count by now. On the surface, it may have *seemed* like we were pretty much on equal footing, but in reality, I was just bulldozing his terrifying power with my own demon lord might. Basically skating through the fight by the skin of my teeth. Would I say fighting like a typical meathead demon? I sure would. Damn this guy for pushing me to the brink.

If the difference in our stats had been any narrower, I was pretty sure I'd either be a headless body spraying blood everywhere or a dead man with a blade sticking out of my chest. Once again, I was deeply, *deeply* grateful to my super tough demon lord body. Long live the demon lord. Long live the dungeon.

As a resident of the Demonic Forest, I had plenty of opportunities to hone my combat skills since I went monster hunting all the time. To be honest, though, I'd never faced anyone as strong as this guy before...which made sense considering I wasn't actually a fan of killing and death matches and shit. Hell, the only reason I even went so hard with the monster hunting was to fatten up my DP wallet. If it weren't for that, I would never *willingly* put myself in danger, especially if there was no reward. What I found sadder was killing each other just for the sake of killing. Miss me with that nonsense.

And let's not forget one crucial fact: on the rare occasions I *did* encounter powerful monsters in the Forest, I always had my dependable partner in crime, Rir, by my side. *Ughhh, and suddenly, I just wanna bury my face in Rir's fur super bad.* I'd ignore his panicked look and keep drowning myself in his fluff. Not a bad way to go if you ask me.

Goddammit. This sucked all of the ass to ever ass. Why me? Why

did I have to fight to the death with this disgusting freak of nature all by my lonesome? *I'm blaming this on that piece of shit prince too.* I would definitely kill him with my own two hands, so help me God.

“Yer a heartless man, aintcha! Even though I’m pinin’ fer ya so much!”

I thrust Zaien between us to fend off the psycho’s charge. Too bad for me, he’d managed to distract me for just long enough that I didn’t see the straight punch coming from his free hand. It drove right into my guts, knocking the wind out of me.

“Gaaah—”

It hurt so bad I nearly passed out, but out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of his blade on its way to pierce my heart. That wasn’t gonna fly with me, so I gritted my teeth and wrenched my body away just in time to avoid taking a fatal blow.

“That hurt, you goddamn eggplant!”

Using the momentum of my spin, I aimed a reckless roundhouse kick at the creepy perv whose head was filled with nothing but gleeful bloodlust. No stance, rhyme, or reason was involved; only pure instinct drove me. Maybe he was caught off guard, but that jackass didn’t manage to get out of the way in time, so my kick slammed hard into his shoulder.

The Battle Maniac sicko experienced the full brunt of my demon lord punt. He bounced around like a ball as he flew off into the air before crash-landing against a castle wall. It was honestly pretty funny to watch.

“Eat shit!”

Not letting this chance slip by, I immediately used magic to summon my water dragon, then blasted it at him. The horndog’s not-so-friendly meeting with the wall had stopped all his movements—at least until he saw the dragon’s jaws snapping toward him. As soon as he did, he did what any fighter of his capabilities would do and jumped, using his insane reaction speed to dodge my dragon’s attack.



Having missed its target, the dragon slammed into the wall, sending water exploding everywhere. That obscured his vision just enough, though. *This is it!* I would take him down in one shot to avoid giving his special abilities the chance to activate.

It was too much of a gamble for me to let a fight with someone like him, who was used to combat, drag out. That was *not* a move I wanted to make. Then, there was the dude's talent with a sword. No way I could even *hope* to win in that department since he so majorly outclassed me in ability level. I knew that for sure just from looking at the countless oozing slices on my body versus the insignificant scratches on his.

If anything, stats was the only category I had him beat in. Specifically, my movement speed, tough body, and a buttload of magic. In that case, the only shot my decidedly battle-unseasoned ass had was to make our fight short. I had to get this over with quickly while I still had the energy to give him a run for his money.

Decision made, I pushed magic through my sword's blade. At the same time, I funneled as much power as I could into my legs and pushed aggressively off the ground. I moved into arm's reach of the freak so fast that it looked like I teleported. With his eyesight clouded by water, his reaction was a beat too slow. Regardless, perhaps because he also had Danger Detection, he still managed to take up a defensive stance so he could intercept my attack. But instead of dicing him, I drove the blade into the ground in front of him.

Instantly, flames shot up from the surface, dying his view bloodred.

"Mpf—?!"

The loon unconsciously let out a sound of astonishment. This attack I'd just launched was a sorcerous circuit Leila had constructed on my request. I called it Crimson Flame. When I poured magic into Zaien, its scarlet blade would create namesake flames, setting whatever it cut on fire. I could even control the size and power of the flames based on how much magic I used. The blast just now was medium-level, I'd say.

I *had* thought about creating a sorcerous circuit on my own, but after I'd considered the issue from different angles, I'd realized that Leila was there. She was damn good at tricky stuff like that, so past me had figured that there was no reason not to let her handle it instead. When I'd asked her if she would take on the project, she'd happily said yes. Seemed she'd wanted to test out a new technique she'd come up with based on magic circuit research she'd been conducting for a long time. Then, lo and behold, she'd exceeded my expectations with the circuit she'd invented.

Anyway, back to the present, I immediately let go of Zaien, which was still wedged in the ground. I then looked past the flames I'd created for the express purpose of blinding my opponent. Zeroing in on the Battle Maniac's heart, I reached for my hip, whipping out and firing my magic pistol.

There was a light, whistling *whoosh*, and a moment later, I heard a bursting sound coming from the other side of the fire. As the flames gradually diminished... *He's gone?!* Right away, Danger Detection pulsed throughout my whole body, indicating serious danger. It was coming from right next to me, so I turned my head—I didn't even know when or how the asshole had managed to get around me, but there he stood with a "bullet" hole in his side.

He's still alive?! Are you fucking kidding me?!

"Ha ha ha! Not bad, Mask! Not bad at all! No way I coulda avoided that without Danger Detection, lemme tell ya!"

He spat blood as he spoke. Despite the burn marks across his body from where he'd been hit by Crimson Flame, he held his sword steadily, its point aimed straight at my noggin. Then, he thrust it toward me, the blade gleaming as it raced my way. I didn't know if it was because of how crazy tense this situation was, but it felt like I was watching a movie in slow motion. It was like I could see the blade coming at me frame by frame.

Well, shit. I can't dodge it. Even with that fleeting thought rushing through my mind, resigning myself mentally to the end, my body still moved on instinct. I raised the arm holding my magic pistol, placing it squarely in his sword's path. *Squelch.* It stabbed clean through, and boy was that painful. So goddamn painful that I wanted to cry and scream like a baby. Except that feeling this pain meant I wasn't dead yet.

Going through my arm diverted his blade just enough that it only grazed my head instead of stabbing it. I'd take it. Right away, I used my other hand as a makeshift spear, making absolutely sure of my target and driving it straight toward his heart.

The first thing I felt was the hardness of bone. Next was the incredibly unpleasant sensation of flesh on my fingertips, and finally, my arm sticking out of his back. Fresh blood showered the entire area.

My arm essentially being a part of his body stopped the Battle Maniac from moving. He looked down to confirm that my arm had indeed penetrated his chest before slowly moving his eyes back to me.

"I...had...fun."

A grin on his face, he choked those words out, blood spewing from his mouth. Then, just like that, he slipped into an eternal sleep. With a wet, sucking sound, I pulled my blood-soaked arm out of his chest. Doing so caused Sir Fights-a-Lot's motionless body to collapse to

the ground. I couldn't help but smirk triumphantly.

"Too bad you weren't a high enough level to challenge a demon lord. Game over."



"Ooowww..."

It hurt. It really fucking hurt. To the point that I wasn't even in the mood to toss out clever one-liners. A cold sweat covered my body. I froze for a second, looking at the sword still sticking out of my arm. Then, I took a deep breath, girded my loins, and pulled it out as fast as I could, like I was ripping off a bandage. Blood spurted from the open wound.

"Nghh— Ahhh, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!"

That curse flew out of my mouth without thought as I tossed the sword away. *Shit, dude. I think I'm gonna cry.* Seriously, this pain was no joke. I could *not* laugh it away, it hurt so friggin' much. Also, they didn't hurt as much as this arm, but the fingers on my other hand were throbbing too thanks to that lethal spear-hand strike. *They're a hundred percent broken.* You know how I knew that? 'Cause of the gnarly way they were bent. In directions they *shouldn't* have bent. That entire attack had been almost completely involuntary on my part. I was glad the killing blow had done its job, but once again, I had to stress that idiot amateurs like me *really* shouldn't be doing shit they weren't used to.

I remembered seeing spear-hand strikes used a lot in manga, but now, I was dead sure that those characters broke their fingers doing it too. Despite pretending like it was nothing, I knew without a doubt that they were just grinning and bearing the violent pain. *Boys and girls, make sure you don't copy us morons.*

When I opened Inventory, I thrust the hand with the broken fingers through the rift. Why? Because the fingers on the other hand, the one attached to the arm with a big-ass hole in it, weren't cooperating. I couldn't move them to save my life. Literally. From inside the rift, I let a Super Potion—no, elixir—roll into the palm of my hand. Gingerly pulling it out, I tugged the stopper off with my mouth and spat it out. My first point of treatment was the arm that got stabbed.

"Urk..."

As the liquid made contact with the gash, I unwillingly moaned in pain. The wound closed up with a *fwish*, my flesh stitching itself back together. It was like I was watching a playback in reverse. Soon enough, my arm was in pristine condition, like there'd never been a gaping hole in it in the first place.

Next, I grabbed the bottle with the hand of my newly healed arm

and poured the potion on my broken fingers. With repulsive cracking and snapping sounds, my digits were back to normal in seconds. Y'know, it hadn't been that long since I'd decided to be more careful about how I used Super Potions, but clearly, that was an impossible task. I mean, how could I *not* be reckless with something so freaking handy?

Man, oh man, who was the idiot who thought of that in the first place? Couldn't've been me. Okay, it was definitely me. No biggie, though, because I'd learned today. Useful things were meant to be used precisely *because* they were useful. Hoarding this stuff would be the bigger waste. Only dummies hesitated in fear of what others might think. And since I was an intelligent, respectable demon lord, I had no choice but to use the Super Potion, especially in this circumstance. Quod erat demonstrandum. Point proven.

“Still, that dude was ridiculously strong.”

I picked up the magic pistol I'd dropped and put it back on my hip. Then, I gripped Zaien's hilt and hefted it onto my shoulder before muttering that to myself as I glanced down at the unmoving Battle Maniac. I'd deadass thought his last attack would be the death of me. When he'd stabbed me with his sword, I'd managed to avoid a lethal blow by unconsciously twisting my arm, but if I'd been even a millisecond too slow, I would've ended up as some kinda Frankenstein's monster sorta thing, with my face skewered and then stitched together.

It felt like I'd only won because my stats were higher. Our physical abilities had been just vastly different. Before fighting him, I'd never seen such sharp, clean swordplay. Thanks to my dynamic, demon lordly powers of vision, though, I'd somehow managed to keep up with him. Despite my opponent's level itself being so far above my own, my stats were still higher than his. Even an Adamantite-class human adventurer said to have a foot in the world of heroic power was no match for my demon lord stats.

That was the unavoidable, unclosable power gap between humans and other species. *Damn, now I get why Nell was chosen as a hero.* Her level was roughly half this freak's, but her stats were more or less the same. It was her high potential that set her leagues apart from the normal human framework.

Though I talked a big game about my existence, there was one caveat. If a bunch of Adamantite-class adventurers got together and decided to show me who's boss, or if an Orichalcum-level one, said to be even more powerful, wanted to pick a fight with me, I might be in trouble. Okay, “might” was an understatement. They'd kill me without breaking a sweat.

Aight, once I'm back in the dungeon, I gotta rethink the dungeon's

defense plan and figure out how to enhance this demon lord body.

In any case, now that I had this particular problem under control, I could think about going after Nell and the others. While I switched gears mentally, something happened. The *crack* of glass shattering reached my ears. At almost the exact same time, I also heard some sort of commotion echo all the way here from outside the castle. No, that wasn't right. I'd been hearing the racket from the city this whole time. These new sounds were coming from another direction—from above.

“What the...?”

Looking up was no help since I couldn't see anything from where I was. *Hmm... Maybe Carlotta and the others who went ahead are fighting?* The upper levels of the castle meant high-ranking military personnel, so if our gang had headed in that direction, there was a very good chance that something had happened.

Well, no point hanging around here anyway, so I might as well just go after them. A leisurely stroll through the castle grounds...would be a waste of time. Flying it was, then. First, I checked Maps for signs of people. Then, I did a thorough visual inspection of my surroundings to double check. Once I was sure there was no one else around, I activated Stealth, immediately popped out both pairs of wings, and took off into the sky by giving them a powerful flap. A floating sensation wrapped around my whole body and the ground instantly got way far away.

I made my way over to where the sound was coming from and found a fierce battle. On the other side of the window, the hero, the lady knight, and the rest of the rescue squad were fanned out around the king, protecting him while they fought with soldiers that appeared to be on the prince's side. The difference in their abilities was so overwhelming that Carlotta and company were basically one-shotting their enemies one after another.

Something else caught my eye, though. I stared at a spot deeper inside, where a young man stood arrogantly in a slightly elevated section of the room. Based on his getup and the fact that soldiers were surrounding him defensively, I had no doubt he was the crown prince. The reason I was focused on him was because Analysis was telling me some crazy shit about his stats.

This motherfucker's already dead!



Something had felt distinctly wrong the instant they'd stepped into the room. This was the audience hall, a chamber where the king would receive visitors. It was a lavish, gorgeous room, with ornaments hanging on the walls and on display everywhere. On the dais placed

on the far side of the room was a beautifully crafted throne. Its high-caliber artisanship was unmistakable even to the untrained eye.

The furnishings matched the room's ambience, and each window's placement seemed to be carefully and deliberately calculated to provide optimal illumination as light streamed in. That combination of light and atmosphere further enhanced the chamber's elegance.

But the royal soldiers within the room presented an extremely jarring contrast to its scrupulously cultivated air. A bit further back on the dais stood Nell and company's target, marshaling his soldiers: the crown prince.

"So you've finally arrived, you worms that would infest and devour our nation! Capture them! They are traitors, imprisoned by antiquated values, who dare to impede our country's progress!"

The prince spoke in a clear, ringing voice, his tone indicating that he fully believed himself to be justice incarnate. His soldiers hailed in agreement, immediately drawing their weapons.

The wrongness Nell had felt concerned the prince himself. Was it his eyes? His demeanor overflowed with the grace and nobility inherent to the aristocracy, but his eyes seemed to be decomposing. That was the only appropriate descriptor she could think of. Just like with the Undead, she couldn't feel a hint of life coming from them. *Something is strange. There's something wrong in this place.* Before she could give voice to that feeling, though, things changed.

"Your Highness! You are suspected of committing the crime of treason! Accordingly, we request that you accompany us right away! Troops, time to work! It has been much too easy for us thus far, so show me your mettle!"

"Yes, Commander!"

Her weapon in hand, Carlotta barked orders to her comrades, who were facing off against enemy soldiers oozing with enmity.

"Your Majesty, I'm sure there are many things running through your mind right now, but I need you to fall back."

"...Understood."

The king nodded with a pained expression and moved behind Nell and the others. At long last, the two camps had confronted each other. Ultimately, though, the battle was one-sided. Frankly speaking, the prince's soldiers were no match for Carlotta and company. For one, they had the knight commander herself, the best of the best even amongst the holy knights. The hero, of course, was an added bonus to their strength. Even the royal guards protecting the prince couldn't hope to fend off their swords.

The other members of the rescue squad couldn't be discounted either, as they were the cream of the crop, handpicked for this operation. They, too, were pulling their weight in the audience hall,

overwhelming the royal guards by putting their abilities on full display. At this rate, it was only a matter of time before they took control of this area.

Nevertheless, what sprang to Nell's mind was an image of the demon lord who had sent them ahead while he stayed behind to stop an enemy. That they were handling this particular situation so well could be directly attributed to his decision, because the man the demon lord was fighting could be considered the enemy's greatest asset. Even Nell knew who their attacker was despite her being largely ignorant of the ways of the world. That man, nicknamed "War Freak," was incredibly dangerous.

Nell knew that the demon lord was highly skilled, but his opponent was as well. She surmised that it would take time for their fight to come to an end. *That's right. Mr. Yuki chose to undertake the most dangerous task.* She wanted to go back to him, which was all the more reason she needed to settle things quickly here. He had said their support would only hinder him, but she was certain there was *something* she could do.

She couldn't very well do nothing. *"It's fine."* *"Oh, really? All right, then."* That was essentially what had transpired when they'd separated. To Nell, that screamed of dependence on others, and that was the one thing she knew he hated. Resolved on her next course of action, Nell kept swinging away. But then, an unbidden thought sprouted in the back of her mind. *Why is His Highness so composed?*

As Nell and her comrades steadily overpowered his royal guards, the tide was clearly turning in their favor. And yet, the prince's expression hadn't changed. He was still possessed of an overabundance of confidence. Could he have some secret scheme in mind to break the deadlock and reverse their positions?

While she was considering all that, one of the windows suddenly shattered from the outside. Glass blasted into the audience hall.

"Huh?!"

Immediately, Nell's brain shifted from her conjecture about the prince to, *A newcomer?!* When she directed her attention to the window, though, she found that her guess was wrong. The figure hurtling in was...*Mr. Yuki?!*



"They're traitors! Seize them!"

Even through the heat of the battle, I heard that shout from where I was hovering near the broken window. The scumbag prince's voice rang out as he made his little speech from the raised platform. Thing was, he was definitely dead, because unless someone was using the Camouflage ability like I was, their real stats would be clearly

displayed. Plus, there was literally no reason whatsoever to fake having 0 HP.

There was only one answer that made sense: he was an Undead. Or something like one, at least. On top of that, my Demon Eyes showed me more about that nasty bit of truth. Just like the Undead I'd encountered so far, the damned prince's entire body was bound tightly by magic, with currents of it swirling around him. The more anyone looked at him, the more they'd be convinced that he *had* to be alive, but that most definitely wasn't the case. He was basically a marionette now.

I didn't know whether an ability or magic of some sort was causing this, but I was almost positive that whoever was controlling him was way better at using whatever it was than the clowns who'd been manipulating the Undead we'd run into. For God's sake, this guy was *talking*.

Maybe he's got one of those creepy-crawly Plago things inside him? The ones from that zombie survival game. Nah, people who were taken over by those weren't straight-up walking corpses.

Jokes aside, as I looked even closer with Demon Eyes, I noticed that a specific part of his body had an extra thick, extra active concentration of magic. It was his central nervous system—that area from his brain to his spinal cord. I hadn't seen this particular feature in any of the Undead I'd run into before, both in the city surrounding the castle and that border town, Alfiro. If I had to guess, I'd say that was how they'd made a dead guy that could pass for a living person.

Still, though, regardless of how normal and human it looked on the surface, there was very much something uncomfortably weird about it. *Why the hell hasn't anyone noticed?* That thought was currently DDoS-ing my brain.

In a world where it was entirely possible to control an enemy like a puppet, there had to be ways to counter or see through that control. I refused to believe there weren't. So, assuming that I was right, I'd expect a country's royal family to have equipment on hand to handle that sort of thing. *Not* having stuff like that would mean they were extremely unprepared. In fact, I'd almost say it'd be just plain stupid.

But wait, I got more. When the king and I had chatted a bit back in the dungeon, he'd mentioned that his son was "growing increasingly erratic." That told me that even *he* found his son's drastic personality change suspicious. All the more reason to use a device or whatever to figure out what was causing his weirdness, right?

I didn't know when the prince had become part of the Undead gang, but if the signs had been there for a while now, *someone* should have already noticed something was out of whack. There was just no way that no one had realized something was screwing with the prince,

that the enemy was using him as a pawn in their godforsaken game.

No. Maybe there actually is a way. I suddenly noticed an item. It was a ring on one of the dirtbag prince's fingers, and there was a ton of magical energy in it.

Ring of Truth and Lies: Interferes with what others can see of the wearer's stats by weaving together truth and lies. Quality: A+.

Mystery solved, huh? That ring was tampering with any abilities that could tell people what was wrong with the prince. It was doing a good job of it too, seeing as its quality rating was near the top of the charts. The only reason I could see through its bullshit was because my Analysis ability was absolutely stacked.

I'd been upping Analysis nonstop because I was dying to see Lefi's stats. Problem was, no matter how much time passed, I still couldn't see jack shit, so it never felt like it was that high of a level. In reality, though, it *was* pretty goddamn strong. Yup, you heard right. It was so high-level that it could basically nullify the effect of that ring even though it was close to being the best possible quality.

Well, shit. I think I just figured out how absolutely un-freaking-real Lefi's stats are. With a rueful smile, I shooed away any other idle thoughts and got back to watching what was happening in the room.

The prince was little more than a doll at this point—a thing made to look like a living person. Someone else was pulling his strings, and that someone had managed to transform a corpse into such a ridiculously detailed fake human. Seeing as that was the case, the odds that they were operating their doll from somewhere far away were low.

Why was I going with that theory? Because they were making puppet boy speak. And not just randomly either. The words coming out of the dead prince's mouth made sense based on what was going on in that room, which they kinda had to since him talking nonsense would make people suspicious. That meant that the mastermind *needed* to be nearby so they could know what was going on. It wasn't out of the question that they were using stuff like my Evil Eyes and Evil Ears, but my Demon Eyes hadn't spotted anything like that so far.

The best thing I could compare my Demon Eyes to was a thermal scope. They did basically the same thing, just that instead of heat signatures, my Demon Eyes identified different magical signatures in my surroundings. If someone was using a magic-based ability like Stealth, I could easily see through its effects. That said, I wasn't totally sure what'd happen if I ran into someone who had that type of ability at level 10. Oh well, that wasn't really worth thinking about. Even Lefi said she only had a few max-level abilities, so all in all, it was pretty safe to assume that no one that powerful was in this room right now.

With those thoughts running through my head, I used Analysis and Demon Eyes together to search through the enemies for—

Peek-a-boo, I see you.

A person who looked like some sort of cabinet minister or something was standing in a corner of the room. I couldn't see their face because they were wearing a hood, but I could tell from their figure that it was a man. Unfortunately, the pendant hanging around his neck was sending out a jamming signal that completely blocked Analysis, so I had no way of knowing what his stats were. Then again, if I actually put some thought into it, I could see why it'd be necessary for him to hide his stats in this situation. The nail in his coffin, though, the definitive proof that it absolutely had to be him, was the magic he possessed.

Thanks to Demon Eyes, I knew that people all had slightly different magical wavelengths. But the magic binding the shitty prince was exactly the same as the magic this guy had. He was the villain playing puppeteer.

Hmph. Bitch-ass poser thinks he's some great tactician 'cause he controls others instead of fighting his own battles. Nasty piece of work. Mofo was about to get his bill for making an enemy out of me, and lemme tell ya, it sure wasn't gonna be cheap.

Having sussed out the real enemy, I scanned the outside of the castle in search of the perfect entry point. *Ooh, that'll work.* Entry point found, I flew away from the castle, going far enough back that I'd be able to get a good bit of momentum going. Then, I immediately turned around to face the castle again and put all my strength into giving my wings a good, hard flap.

With a *boom*, I accelerated like a rocket. My whole body enveloped by wind pressure, I crashed through my target window, shattering it. I made sure to put away my wings the second I landed, and bada bing bada boom, infiltration complete.

Glass shards went everywhere. A few folks inside screamed at my surprise appearance. I rode out the force of my landing straight toward the mastermind, who'd been one of the screamers, swinging Zaien down at him in hopes of killing the ever-loving shit out of him. Despite him being frozen in confusion for a few seconds, he managed to recover his senses just enough to guard himself by throwing up both arms in front of his face.

Zaien made contact with his limbs, but instead of flesh, it felt like it was hitting something solid. Was there something on his arms? Whatever. It was no match for Zaien, which hacked off his arms before slicing diagonally across his shoulders.

Tch. Too shallow. Seemed like I'd narrowly missed inflicting a fatal wound, because for all the blood spraying from his body, the man

showed no signs of going down. The silver lining was that his necklace, the magical tool he'd been using to screw with my detection abilities, had apparently broken when Zaien had slashed it. Seeing my chance, I immediately activated Analysis.

"Wha— You son of a *bitch*! You're a demon!"

"Kh! You can use Analysis?!"

Finally, I could see the man's true form—he was part of the demon species. While blood kept flooding from where his arms used to be, the demon took a huge leap back, putting a fair bit of space between us. With his identity now exposed, he jerked his head like he was sending out some sort of instruction.

"Your Highness?!"

That tension-filled voice came from behind me. I quickly looked over in that direction and saw the prince draw the ceremonial-looking sword hanging from his waist. He then rushed from the dais he'd been standing on to attack the king.

Seeing the prince's sudden charge, the holy knights surrounding the king immediately gave up on trying to capture him. Instead, they all gave off a killing aura now. When the prince got close enough, one of the knights stabbed him right through the stomach—but he didn't stop.

Well, no shit, Sherlock. Dickhead's already pushin' daisies. He wasn't about to keel over from one little slash to the guts. Sadly, though, the king's guard didn't know that. The prince still moving after a counterattack that should have stopped him in his tracks had everyone absolutely bugging out.

Nell and Carlotta, the most reliable of the bunch, couldn't even rush to their aid since they were clashing swords with enemies of their own. I could see the panic and frustration on both of their faces as they valiantly tried to make their way toward the king. *Jesus Christ, his bodyguards are useless!*

Knowing they wouldn't be able to stop the prince, I clicked my tongue, pulled out the magic pistol at my waist, and fired, aiming for his arms and legs. My bullets found their marks, causing the puppet of a prince to trip over himself. After seeing him collapse, I faced forward again, only to be met with sharp fangs closing in on me.

I twisted my body quickly and managed to dodge the snapping teeth, but that turned out to be a feint. The demon had bought himself time with that illusion to rip off his robe-like clothes so he could produce his wings. Instantly, he shot into the air, headed toward the window I'd hurled myself through.

"Like hell you're getting away!"

In that same moment, I aimed and fired my magic pistol at the demon bastard, but he was slick as all hell, dodging the magic bullets

like he was a leaf in the wind. One round did hit him, but it only made him stagger a bit. He still ended up flying out of the castle.

Goddammit! What do I do?! Chase him?! I was torn on the idea of busting out my own wings and going after him. If I did that, I'd be exposing myself as a demon in front of everyone here. I shouldn't have hesitated for even a second, though, right? Totally went against my usual balls-to-the-wall mentality.

"Mr. Wye!"

Nell shouted anxiously. At the same time, Scout started going off.

"Ugh, what is it this time?!"

Grinding my teeth in rage, I turned in the direction the warning was coming from and saw a massive summoning circle on the floor. It had been drawn without me or anyone else noticing. Up until literally just now, I hadn't been able to see its shape or shadow even with Demon Eyes, which meant it had to have been that dipshit demon's doing.

Right away, I used a massive amount of my magic to intervene, destroying the energy in the circle with my Dispel Magic technique. I threw everything I had at it, but I might have been a biiiit too late. When it started glowing conspicuously brightly, I could see something huge forming within it. *What the hell is it?*

"Creature." That was the only word that fit the enormous thing that finally showed itself. It was almost three times as tall as me, but it stood on two legs and had two arms, so it could theoretically fall into the humanoid category...except for the part where it was a freaking mess.

Its muscles were so huge and bulging that it was nearly impossible to differentiate the various parts of its body. Its head, neck, and shoulders were mostly fused into one, I dunno, section? And even weirder was that its legs were too short. There was no way it wouldn't have trouble walking. I honestly couldn't think of a good way to describe it beyond it being the only being I'd seen in this world whose appearance was less fantasy and more sci-fi.

Race: Undead

Class: Forbidden Spirit of the Dead

Level: 15

HP: 0 / 5,000

MP: 61 / 61

Strength: 990

Stamina: 959

Agility: 75

Magic: 15

Dexterity: 64

Luck: 50

Abilities: Regeneration 6, Otherworldly Strength 3

Title: Artificial Corpse, A Taboo Forced into Creation

Huh. So *this* was that chode of a demon's trump card. Its stats were wildly unbalanced, like, damn. Strength and stamina through the freaking roof but hella slow and no magic, eh? Its first title of "Artificial Corpse" meant that this thing was clearly made by a person. Seemed like kind of a dumb title, to be honest. Like, who else would build a corpse?

Its level was fairly low and its distorted stat values had to be the unfortunate side effect of its unnatural creation. Just looking at it was enough to tell me that it wasn't anywhere close to being a finished product. Still, the biggest problem it'd give me was probably its Regeneration ability. Shii had the same ability, but this monstrosity had it at a high level. Seemed like it would take a long-ass time to fully destroy.

Having said all that, it was a serious pain in the ass because no matter how much I wanted to ignore the damn thing, it had way too much firepower for that. Its entire existence was too well-suited to stopping someone in their tracks. That scaredy-demon had left it behind as the world's worst parting gift, using it to keep me and everyone else here from chasing it.

Crap. I can't even see him anymore. Very much in his element, that butt-muncher of a demon had sped off the second he'd sprung into that big, blue sky. While I was distracted by this behemoth, that SOB became little more than a speck in the wind. There was no point going after him now.

Yeah, it was typical in a boss fight to go up against a titanic opponent, but come on. *This* was ridiculous.

"Nggghh... Ahhh, damn it all to hell! That evil, shit-for-brains, dick-munching asshole! It's not like he *had* to fulfill that goddamn stereotype with this big-ass motherfucker!"

Swear to God, my head was ready to explode from the rage and frustration storming around in there. Luckily, there was a perfectly good punching bag for me to let all that bile out on. I broke into a run toward the gigantic, sluggishly moving dum-dum and swung at it with Zaien. Because of its armored flesh or muscles or whatever, I felt recoil buzz through my arms. It felt like I was cutting through rock. But I was a goddamn demon lord and my weapon used to be a goddamn cursed magic blade. Nobody was gonna make chumps out of us, least of all this horror. With that one slash, I managed to chop off one of its arms.

“Hrhgmerzvd.”

The titan let out a deep, nonsensical roar that made my ears bleed. Then, it tried to whack me with the fist on its remaining arm. Its attack speed was outrageous. Despite the main part of its body moving as slow as a slug, that Strength value apparently wasn't just for show. TIL. A single blow would probably have blasted my ass straight to the moon, no cap. *Ooh, a free trip to the moon sounds really nice, actually.* Yeah, right. Suck my balls; ain't nobody got time for that.

As I used Analysis on the hell-forsaken giant, I jumped to the side, dodging its bigger-than-my-head fist. With that, my turn came to go on the offensive, so I tightened my grip on Zaien.

“What?!”

The arm I'd chopped off had grown back. No, to be more accurate, it looked like the fallen arm had reattached itself. Actually, if my eyes weren't deceiving me, that arm had wiggled like it was alive and then stuck itself back to the shoulder it had come from. Watching this jumbo beast move both its arms around like nothing had happened, I figured out that I hadn't done much damage to it. It was hard to tell because of the whole “0 HP” thing, but I was confident in my conclusion.

Ya know, I thought I'd understood that its Regeneration ability was a high level. Seeing it in action really drove home how much of a pain in the ass it was, though. It was absolutely nothing like when the shape-changing Shii regenerated. Torn muscle fibers zigzagging to try to rejoin with each other looked like millions of worms squirming. Had to be one of the most horrifying, disgusting things I'd ever had the misfortune to experience. From the bottom of my heart, I truly wished for the bulky brute's complete annihilation.

“O raving abomination, I bid thee return to your final resting place. Undead Away!”

Picking up on the fact that the huge thing was focused on me, Nell saw her chance to help a demon lord out and jumped into the fray, shooting her holy magic at the enemy. Her super-effective spell against the Undead...did a whole lotta nothing. Now I knew without a doubt that it wasn't a normal Undead. I'd seen Nell's holy magic attack make countless normal ones drop, well, dead, but it didn't even scratch this colossus. *I wonder if it thinks it was jabbed by toothpicks or something?*

“This...puts us in a tight spot, huh? What should we do, Mr. Wye?”

A quick glance at our surroundings gave me a much-needed update. The holy knights had lived up to expectations by responding to the new threat at supersonic speed. Two were guarding the king,

while Carlotta and the others had their swords pointed at the repulsive monster.

What about the prince's envoy? Everything changing as fast as it was had them confused as confused could be. For starters, their boss, the prince, had suddenly charged their king with a sword, refusing to stop even after getting his stomach sliced open. While they had been trying to wrap their heads around *those* events, a demon was revealed to have been hiding among their ranks. And finally, the massive whatchamacallit had shown up. Really, it was no wonder they were completely lost, not knowing where to go or what to do. I could sympathize, but at the same time, if I were in their shoes, I'd sure be kicking myself for throwing my lot in with the wrong person.

By the way, let's talk about the prince. For having somehow still been moving even after being stabbed repeatedly and getting two huge, gaping holes shot through his body, the holy knights had managed to subdue him. But once his proverbial puppet strings had been snipped, not a single twitch came out of him. That most likely had everything to do with that needle-dick demon running for the hills. The magic controlling the prince had disappeared along with the weenie.

"Nell, do you have a stronger holy magic spell than that?"

"Well, there *is* Salvation: Undead Away, but based on what just happened... No, I should still try it. Mr. Wye, can you manage to hold that thing off for a bit? The chant will take some time."

"Roger!"

"We will assist you."

As soon as Nell heard my and Carlotta's replies, she exhaled deeply before starting to murmur to herself. *Okay, my time to shine. Gotta make sure this giant doesn't go anywhere.*

"Let's do this, Zaien!"

I could feel Zaien happily agreeing, so I stepped close to the giant and swung my beloved sword at it. One strike, then two, and three. While I went to town on the thing, it swung back with its oversized, heavyweight-class fist. I dodged its blows, though, letting the floor of the room get filled with fist-sized craters. The bashing had the walls crumbling too.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the blue sky through the places where the wall should have been. I made use of the Crimson Flame sorcerous circuit when I could, but survey said it was no good. Tall, Buff, and Ugly's...flesh? Muscle? Whatever those fibers were, they were bursting through the burnt skin and regenerating. *Disinfecting the filth ain't gonna work here, is it?*

"Luod, one stroke! Valsa, attack two seconds after! You must parry its hits! If you try to defend yourself instead, you'll be decimated!"

With Carlotta and the others joining in, the flurry of attacks got even more violent. They were actually pretty impressive, to tell you the truth. They were just about as good with their swords as that Adamantite-class adventurer I'd fought. The holy knights' barrage of attacks covered the freak of nature in wounds.

Then, there was the knight commander herself. On top of helping the other two fight, she shouted out instructions whenever she could. The longer the fight went on, the better their teamwork got, and the clearer it was that she was toying with Big Thingus. *Fuck, she's good. What a genius all-rounder.*

Buuuut there was still that whole issue with its stupidly powerful regeneration ability. There had been a tiny part of me that'd been hoping we could get ahead of that ability by mangling the crap out of it and turning it to mincemeat, but unfortunately for us, its regeneration speed was so fast that the instant it got cut, its flesh started to stitch itself back together.

Real talk, my fighting style always relied on one-shot kills, not landing multiple hits. My greatsword was perfect for that sort of thing. A drawn-out battle was pretty much impossible for me since I didn't have the competency to pull it off. Plus, I couldn't get as many swings in because of how wide they were. All of this meant it sucked to be me, but it sure worked out beautifully for the Undead monster. *That dickless bitchbag of a demon...* Next time I met him, I had to make absolutely sure to show him my undying appreciation with Zaien.

"Everyone, move aside!"

In the middle of our brawl with the gigantic motherfucker—no amount of different words could truly emphasize how huge it was—Nell gave us the signal from her location a step behind us. The moment we heard her words, the holy knights and I jumped to the sides, opening up a line of fire for her.

"Salvation: Undead Away!"

When she launched her spell, an unbelievably powerful light flared from her holy sword, flooding the entire room. It couldn't even be compared to her earlier attempt. The blinding attack flew straight toward the nightmarish behemoth, which was way too slow to evade it and took a direct hit.

The thing staggered a few steps the moment it got hit. Then, unable to withstand the shock of the impact, its upper half arched backward and fell to the floor. A heavy *thud* shook the room.

"Whooooa... That was *strong*."

Damn, is that really holy magic? They should call it cannon magic or something, jeez. I was completely and utterly blown away by Nell's magic. It was way more powerful than I would've ever imagined it was. But I came back to my senses immediately, hoisted Zaien again,

and raced toward the giant. Nell's attack was the first time we'd managed to knock the titan out, and it would've been cause for celebration if it weren't for the fact that its body was still alive and kicking. *We need to obliterate it before it has the chance to regenerate!*

"Yo! If we're gonna finish it off, now's our only shot!"

"Right you are!"

Carlotta followed behind me as I charged the monstrous monstrosity. While the torso Nell had burst open with her holy magic began to regenerate, it slowly tried to stand back up. I swung Zaien down at it—and it *grabbed my blade*.

"Oh."

Oh.

"Whaaaat?!"

"Haah, haah... M-Mr. Wye?!"

"Mask!"

It was bad luck on my part to have slashed at it vertically in a part with a hard bone. Although I'd managed to cut through about a third of its arm, Zaien got stuck at that point, so it'd grabbed the blade. After that, with me still holding on to my sword, the mofo swung its arm with a *whoom* and threw me like a rag doll.

"Whoooo! Gaaah!"

Getting launched like that had me crashing against the ceiling. And then gravity kicked in, because I felt myself plunging downward.

"Khaaaah!!!"

Since I hadn't been able to brace myself for the fall, I made that stupid sound as I hit the ground with a bone-rattling *splat*.

"Ooowww... It hurts..."

With stars floating around my head like I was in some kind of cartoon, I put my hands on the floor and straightened my arms, dizzily pushing my body up. Watching me, Nell couldn't help mumbling.

"Um, Mr. Wye? It's too bad your finishing move ended up being so sloppy. And at such a critical time too."

"Sh-Shut it!"

D-Damn it... Stupid, brainless colossus. It had deadass shocked me. That was the most unpleasant surprise I'd been unfortunate enough to experience all day. A glance at the scene told me that Carlotta had taken over the fight in place of my dumb ass that got lobbed like a ball. Her swordsmanship was infinitely more polished than mine, so she was basically leading the freak around by its nose—if it had one—while smacking it around. Her title of Battle Maiden fit her fighting style unbelievably well.

Sad to report, though, that the repulsive giant had already regenerated the part Nell had destroyed. I couldn't find any trace of the flesh ripped apart by her light. *This means I get a do-over, don't it?*

Maaan, I'm so happy I could cry.

"It didn't work, huh? I'm sorry. It seems my magic just isn't strong enough. What a waste of the time you all bought for me."

Nell stared at the creature with a grim expression on her face. But I shook my head at her words.

"No, I don't think it was a waste."

"Huh?"

I'd been keeping an eye on the thing this whole time, and I'd learned two things from it. First, its regeneration speed had definitely slowed down. Thus far, any parts injured by my and Carlotta's attacks had regenerated within seconds, but that hadn't been the case with its torso. After Nell blew it up, it had taken a little over a minute to heal. Same went for the arm I'd cut too at that point. Sure, a minute was still pretty fast, but now, it was obvious that Nell's holy magic was messing with its regeneration.

The second thing I'd picked up on was that whenever it regenerated, it didn't produce new parts. For example, when I'd chopped off its arm not too long ago, the arm hadn't grown back like how it would have for everyone's favorite green alien named after a woodwind. Instead, the detached arm had reattached itself. It was the same deal with its other wounds. In short, its Regeneration ability wasn't creating parts from scratch, which meant...

"Nell, I know you're exhausted, but do you think you can do that holy magic one more time?"

That one blast had chewed through a third of her MP. In a perfect world, she'd be able to do it two more times, but she was breathing pretty heavily right now. The force behind that spell had probably sucked up a ton of her energy.

"Y-Yes, I-I think I can manage if it's just once."

"Got it. Here, drink this just to be safe."

I pulled out a bottle of Super Mana Potion and tossed it her way. Having switched places with the other holy knights, Carlotta walked toward us.

"Nell's holy magic is effective against that monstrosity. Halfway through, it recouped its normal regeneration speed, but my initial few blows healed much more slowly. Though it's quite different in form and nature, ultimately, I believe that it is still considered an Undead."

She's thinking the same thing as me, huh? If she said so, then that was that.

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing actually. Ooh, I just had an idea."

"Indeed? What a coincidence. I have one as well, but please, go right ahead. I'd like to hear your thoughts."

Carlotta responded with a smirk.

“Okay, so it’s not, like, a super-detailed plan or anything, but I say we hack off its limbs and chuck them out the window.”

My thought process was that there was no point in cutting it up into a zillion pieces because of its insanely fast regeneration speed. Instead, our first step would be to zap it with Nell’s holy magic. Then, while it was slow to regenerate, we’d dismember it with an all-out attack. After that, we’d each take its different parts and dump them far away from each other. Even this abomination would turn into a lifeless meatball if we did that. Or so I assumed, anyway. I really, *really* hoped it’d pay off because if that didn’t kill it, I didn’t know what else we could do.

“Yes, I find that to be our best option. Then, Mask, will you take the lead in cutting it into pieces? You should be far more qualified for that task than us.”

“Roger. Then all of you will take the parts and get rid of them. Sound good?”

“Indeed. Nell, just once more. None of us have magic as powerful as yours, so it’s up to you.”

“U-Understood!”

“All right, team, let’s get back to buying time for our her—oh, before we do that, though.”

I walked toward the battleground. When I was close enough to my destination, I kicked the enemy soldiers right in their asses and sent them flying. Because they’d been a little too slow to react, they’d been on the verge of getting flattened by horror’s fist, but my quick action had moved them just out of reach.

“Get out of our way, you sneaky little rats! If you’re not gonna fight us or that thing, freaking leave already!”

Aren’t you supposed to be soldiers? How ’bout you act like it, you lazy sacks of shit. I mean, damn, look at me. I was just a normal member of the general public—general *demon lord* public, really, but I still put my life on the line to fight. If anything, these assholes should be switching places with me since that was their freaking job.

Maybe it was my rage or maybe it was something else, but either way, it got a response out of a member of the enemy squad. The man, who seemed like their commander since he was wearing an extremely lavish uniform, was clearly pissed. He spoke through gritted teeth.

“Ngh... Indeed, we have no other choice! Men, listen up! As citizens concerned for our country’s future, we cannot allow the holy knights to outshine us! We will take up our weapons and aid in this battle!”

“A-Aaaye!”

Their leader’s newfound resolution seemed to inspire the rest of the enemy troops. Until a few minutes ago, they’d been running

around like headless chickens, letting the situation overpower them. But now, they'd reorganized themselves and were presenting a proper, united front. It was excellent. With that, I could count them as combat assets.

Me, Carlotta, and the rest of the holy knights would probably have been enough manpower for the dissection part of the operation. The delivery portion would require a lot more manpower, though. Like, the monster was literally a huge lump of flesh. All the pieces would weigh a ton by themselves.

"Heh heh, how thrilling. You put a boot up their rears *and* lit a fire under those very same body parts. Well done."

I scowled at Carlotta, who was clearly enjoying the shenanigans, if that grin on her face was anything to go by.

"Hey, isn't it technically *your* job to commandeer them?"

"Well, you're not wrong, though you have to keep in mind that we were trying to kill each other just a short while ago. It's much easier when someone who wasn't involved in the fighting mediates. You have my thanks, Mask."

"Oh, yeah? Then I guess I'm glad I was useful. Sheesh. Anyway, Nell, we're counting on you."

"Understood! I'll begin the chant! Please keep our opponent busy in the meantime!"

Thus, Nell went to work reciting the spell again.

"Commander! Nell!"

One of the holy knights shouted a warning at us. Seemed that even the stump-legged, bird-brained, humongous pile of Undead garbage recognized that the hero's attack was a threat to its existence. The moment Nell began chanting, it started lumbering its way toward us, its stomps shaking the floor. Before, it had only taken two, three sluggish steps max anytime it had moved. Now, though, it may as well have been jogging. Hoping to cut it off, the holy knights and the newly revitalized enemy soldiers went on the offensive. Unluckily for us, though, stopping that horrific juggernaut was straight-up never gonna happen.

"Tch. Nell, get back!"

At my order, she nodded and moved farther away from us, continuing her incantation the whole time. Once she'd moved, I took a step forward and sprung in front of the behemoth.

"Thanks for wasting my brain cells by making them learn about you, you stubby-legged asshole!"

I evaded a giant fist that was barreling down on me, then sliced one of its legs clean off with Zaien. Its stance crumbled, and the dead thing tumbled forward. Thank the maker for Zaien having such a long blade. A normal sword would have been too short to do the job.

“Swap!”

Carlotta shouted that as she leaped in to have a go at the truck-sized Undead. As she did, the thing tried to lift itself back up with its hands, but she put a quick end to that by slicing at the tendon behind its right elbow. Having rendered its right arm pretty much useless, she went with the flow and hacked at the joint under its left shoulder.

“Gawnujdgrhm!”

For as fucked-up-looking as it was, Jumbo Jack-Off here was designed to be humanlike. Its physical makeup seemed to be a whole lot like that of the human body, because with both arms out of order from Carlotta’s precise sword slashes, it collapsed again, this time headfirst.

“We’re next! Follow the commander’s and Wye’s leads!”

“Don’t allow the holy knights to obtain all the glory!”

Both the holy knights and the enemy soldiers swarmed the monster. In order to delay its regeneration as much as possible, they focused their attacks on the body parts that might start rejoining. Sure, us being three different groups thrown together last minute showed in our terrible coordination, but we were doing one hell of a job of buying Nell the time she needed.

“I’m ready!”

It’s finally time.

“Salvation: Undead Away!”

At her cue, we all bolted. Within moments, a huge blast of power was let loose from the holy sword she had pointed right at the monster. The room was flooded with light and sound.

“Raaah!”

I didn’t want to give the creature a chance to counter, so I kicked off the ground and rushed toward it basically right alongside Nell’s attack. The flash from her spell was blinding to the point that even my Demon Eyes were unusable, but that wasn’t a problem. I had another way to “see” things: Zaien.

My greatsword didn’t have eyes, of course, but it made tiny adjustments in the angle of its slice whenever I swung at anything. That was its masterful way of helping me land perfect hits. Anytime I drew it, it knew it was being drawn. That made it crazy happy, and it never hesitated to let me know how happy it was. In a nutshell, my beloved weapon could somehow tell what was going on around it.

The messages Zaien would send me were a lot harder to make sense of than what Rir and slime form Shii would “tell” me. Still, though, its intentions were more than clear from the vague emotions and images it would send me.

As for how it was helping me right now, I was using the information it was sending about both my and the enemy’s respective

positions as a basis for my attack. Zaien told me that the thing was slightly in front of me, so I raised the sword I loved so much over my head and readied myself. I funneled every ounce of power stored in me into the blade, and the moment my vision cleared, I launched my attack.

Zaien had been as dead on as dead on could be in judging my distance from Big Fugly. The blade roared forward like it was exploding into action, and with a single slice from the top of the thing's head straight down through its crotch, it split perfectly in half. We weren't stopping there, though. Next up, I intended to make a horizontal cut to separate its upper and lower halves. To do that, I spun Zaien around, and just as I was about to slash sideways, a fist hurtled toward me.

"Whooooa!"

I thought I'd managed to dodge it by the skin of my teeth, but it turned out that the giant's goal wasn't to grind my bones. The hand on its dismembered right half stopped just short of pounding me into the ground. Instead, the huge fist opened up and wrapped tightly around me.

"Ngah!"

I let go of Zaien just in time to brace myself against the hand with both arms. That had kept me from getting instantly squeezed to death, but the titan's grip was tightening up on me like a vise.

"Hah...mpf...a strength contest, eh?! Sure! Bring it...on!"

"Mask?! Do you need help?!"

"Sorry! Looks like...there's been a...change of plans! I'll figure...it out...here! The rest of you...take care of...the left half!"

Nell's holy magic had slowed down its regeneration speed, but we still only had a minute of weakness to take advantage of before it was back to normal. In other words, we couldn't afford to screw this up. Also, though the Abominable Strongman had me beat in strength stats-wise, so far, I was somehow holding my own against it. That didn't mean a whole lot, though, seeing as there wasn't much time left.

Since its body was split into two, the heavyweight horror wasn't able to stand solidly on its own two feet. Or, well, it didn't have two feet to stand solidly on because I'd hacked one off earlier. Seeing an opportunity, I lowered my hips and, using the power in both my legs, pushed my body forward. *Conditions are in our favor, ladies and gents.*

"U-Understood! Knights, you're always boasting of your strength! Now is the time to prove your words!"

"Yes, Commander!"

After pumping up her own subordinates, Carlotta turned toward the enemy soldiers and raised her voice.

“Royal guards, if you truly wish to test yourselves against us, this is your chance! Should you not, we will take the honors for all the meritorious deeds thus far!”

“Hmph! As if we need to be told! Did you hear her, men?! We’ll demonstrate here and now that we’re no less capable than them!”

“Aye!”

Once I’d made sure that the others were all set, I focused on my own problem. Still in the creature’s massive clutches, I put all my power into my legs and pushed against my revolting prison. I wouldn’t have been surprised if my veins exploded from all the pressure—but then I made the right half of its body move. We were headed for a giant hole it had made in one of the walls while trying and failing to crush me with its fist. *I’m a yeet your ass outside!*

“Wothsdmhrgr.”

“Fuuuuuuuck! That hurts, you cocksucker! Stop powering up!”

Out of instinctual desperation, it poured more power into its fingers, tightening its grip on my body. Both of my arms were making nasty creaking noises at this point. If I lost focus for even a fraction of a second, I would be reborn as the messy filling of a meat pie.

“I ain’t reincarnating again! Once was more than enough!”

I kept forcing the grotesque goliath’s right half along until it was finally next to the window. *One! More! Step!*

“Mr. Wye!”

That was Nell’s voice. It was coming from behind me. She was panting wildly, likely from all the energy she’d exerted firing not one but two powerful blasts of magic. It was obvious that just standing was taking everything she had right now. Even so, the hero clenched her teeth, did her best to lift my insanely hefty Zaien, and heaved it toward me.

After seeing what she’d done out of the corner of my eye, I quickly relaxed my arms, bent my knees, and got as low to the ground as demon lordly possible. My sudden movement caused the giant’s fist to loosen up, allowing me to slip free. It tried to grab me again, but all it caught this time was air.

“I’ve had enough of your horse crap!”

I grabbed Zaien’s hilt in midair as it flew in my direction. Making sure I stayed low, I took up a stance with my greatsword.

“Time for you to die again! You’ve more than outlived your second welcome, you big bastard!”



One stroke. Released from its position practically kissing the floor, Zaien swept sideways, cutting off the thing's only leg. The blade's momentum carried it straight through the wall, slicing into that as well as it made a complete circle. Losing its sole source of support, the creature's right half collapsed right then and there—and then, it fell outside through the hole in the wall.

But I didn't let that make me lose focus. I immediately spun around and saw that the left half had successfully been chopped into pieces like we'd planned. Several people lifted the parts and moved to different windows around the chamber. Then, everyone tossed their pieces out their windows, leaving only a few parts in the room itself. Though they tried to reconnect, their efforts were in vain. The bits wriggled around all squishy and gross-like, but little by little, their movements slowed down before finally stopping altogether. Wouldn't even twitch.

Everyone was silent for a bit. Would the parts move again? Would they rejoin? Those thoughts running through all our minds, not a single person here, me included, sheathed their weapon. You could feel the tension in the room as we stared at the cuts of meat. After a while, I nodded and slowly lowered Zaien, my cherished sword. Watching me, Carlotta nodded as well, then looked around at every person here.

“My friends, victory is ours.”

“Yeeeeeeaaaaahhhhh!!!”

The collective battle cry shook the whole room, echoing for quite some time.



“In summary, my son was...he was being controlled by...by a demon?”

Holy knights were rushing around the hall. They were from a reinforcement squadron sent separately by the Church, not Carlotta's group. Right now, they were in the middle of cleaning up the aftermath of the battle. Their main responsibility was treating the wounded, followed by collecting any remaining pieces from the creature, and lastly, dealing with the soldiers who'd been supporting the prince.

Speaking of those guys, they'd stopped resisting altogether. Disarmed, they obediently obeyed the holy knights' instructions. I suspected that they already understood that the cause of this incident wasn't simply the prince being naughty.

In the center of all this was the king, his face blank with shock as he carried his unfortunately transformed son. The prince didn't move

while he was in his father's arms. He was nothing more than a normal corpse now.

"Yeah, that's the gist of it. Your boy was being manipulated by the demon that escaped."

I spoke to the king while rejecting a nearby holy knight's offer to use healing magic on me with an "I'm fine, thanks."

"This... This whole time he...he was being controlled...?"

"Most likely."

At my nod, the king murmured, "I see..." before looking back down at his son. Seeing their king like this, no one in here knew what to say to him.

As far as the prince's soldiers went, they gazed at their former leader with mournful expressions, hands pressed to their hearts as they offered silent prayers.

From my perspective, I'd only thought of the prince as my enemy, the bona fide scum of the earth. But seeing both his father's and the soldiers' reactions, I could tell he had been dearly loved. He might've been a decent guy before the demon got control of him. I would've liked to have met him back then too.

After staring quietly at his son's dead body for a while, the king finally, slowly began speaking.

"Though I noticed the change in my son, I could not see through that dark veil until today. I was able to neither trust nor protect him... Bah, I am a wastrel of a father."

"Your Majesty..."

Nell's voice was strained. She looked like she definitely wanted to say something but couldn't get the words out.

"You... You were the one in the greatest pain, weren't you, Lute? Forgive me, my son. Forgive me..."

The king held his son's body to his chest as he cried silently. The rest of us stood in place and stayed quiet, staring at a father's back.

Chapter 3: The Ones Left Behind

We wrapped things up pretty smoothly after that, which was basically a given seeing as the leader of the princely faction, the prince himself, had met his unfortunate end. Without a bigwig they could sucker into doing their dirty work, the nobles who were part of the prince's faction had gone into full-on meltdown mode. That had made capturing them quick and easy, and thus the country had waved goodbye to the chaos that had it on the brink of civil war.

That said, a lot of the prince's aristocratic supporters didn't live in the royal capital. They'd chosen to hole themselves up in their own territories, so technically, we couldn't call the case *completely* closed. Unfortunately for them, though, heads would definitely be rolling by the dozens soon. Literally. *Rest in piss, losers.*

As for who was in charge of the country, the king was out of prison and back in power. For a while there, he'd been so deeply depressed that we'd all been worried about him taking his own life. Turned out that he'd done a lot of reflecting, though, and the conclusion he'd come to was that he'd never be able to stand proudly before his son's grave if he gave up the throne and avoided responsibility for everything that had happened. He decided to keep reigning over the country, at least until order was restored, and said he'd wait to make a decision about what would come after.

Regarding government stuff, a lot of people in positions of power had been, to be blunt, executed, so a lot of political offices had opened up. Because of the insane amount of effort the Church had put into rescuing the king, a good number of those roles had been filled by its members. From their perspective, everything had worked out just the way they'd wanted. The Church had guaranteed its stability and raised its social standing in one fell swoop.

All that to say, things had settled down in this country. But honestly, I couldn't deny that I kinda felt like all my hard work had gone to waste. My entire plan had banked on killing the prince as the final solution to all my problems, but instead, I now had a new enemy in the form of that demon. Granted, even if I still didn't know who the true mastermind was, I'd at least gotten some kind of answer about everything that had happened to me, so I definitely didn't think this was a *total* loss. Then again, I didn't really care who was behind all this. All I wanted was for the asshole—or assholes—to give me a

goddamn break.

Let me take a stab at what you guys are probably thinking. “Oh, hey, it’s like that thing in shonen manga where a chapter ends with the introduction of a new villain!” Something like that, right? And I bet you’ve got it in your heads that there’ll be a power creep and all that. I gotta say, I was never a fan of that trope. Always thought it was a pain in the ass. It was the exact same garbage every time too. An enemy would show up at the beginning of a story arc looking like a badass powerhouse just to end up as some low-grade chump halfway through.

Anyway, that little rant aside, the only blessing in disguise was that I’d been in disguise this whole time. Between my mask hiding my face and Camouflage fudging my stats, there was basically no chance that dickbag had figured out who I really was, which was a win in my book. With my true identity safe for now, I’d kept the target off my back and could focus on protecting my dungeon’s peace.

Ya know, I honestly didn’t think the mask would turn out to be so handy. I mean, I know I’m the one who made it and put it on, but still, it definitely over-performed.

Circling back to the demon at the center of this whole ordeal, I knew one thing for sure: his race was “Something-or-Other Daemon.” Yeah, yeah, I know, but I don’t wanna hear it. There was a whole lot to read on that line and I kinda forgot exactly what it said. But I definitely, *definitely* remembered the Daemon bit, so I was a million percent sure of him being part of the demon species.

Along with Necromancy and Brainwashing, the bastard had a ton of other evil-sounding abilities perfect for all kinds of dark deeds and cloak-and-dagger crap. Based on what I’d been told, that son of a bitch had spent years pretending to be one of the prince’s cabinet ministers. He apparently spent a lot of his time with the prince, so he’d probably been brainwashing him a little at a time. Once he added his Necromancy to the mix, he was able to create the perfect puppet.

I was inclined to believe that it wasn’t actually the prince who’d ordered the invasion of my territory but that damned demon. *Then was his real motive to get the humans to attack Lefi?* Dividing the country into two with an insurrection and pissing off the royal capital’s citizens with his recklessness made me think that the asswipe had been trying to destroy the country from within.

Releasing Undead into the city was a perfect example to support my theory. From the start, he’d never actually wanted to take over the nation. If I assumed that his original goal had always been just to cause mayhem, then in that sense, his strategy had been pretty cut and dry. Following that train of thought, manipulating the humans into invading Lefi’s territory was just one part of his plan. Lefi

wouldn't take an attack lying down; she definitely would've annihilated this entire country if the invasion had worked out for him. What other reason could he have had for devising this scheme? In conclusion, everything he'd done had been to crush this nation.

Fuck all the way off with that shit. Lefi isn't some machine you can use to slaughter people. I'll remember this. And I'll make you pay for it—with plenty of interest. Keep that in mind, ya pencil-dicked demon scum.

There was one other thing that bugged me about this new enemy. It had to do with the black-robed clowns I'd run into during the Undead incident in that border town, Alfiro. Those guys had been humans, but they'd used the same kind of magic and skulked around in the shadows just like this demon. They had too many things in common.

Not to mention what the last of those black-robed cowards had shouted at me when I'd found them. *"Why is a demon interfering with our plans?!"* Back then, it had sounded like he was asking why a demon was helping the humans they were attacking, but he could have been asking why a demon, who should have been their ally, was interfering.

Humans and demons had a long and hostile history. Just look at the fact that Lew, Leila, and Iluna had spent time as slaves. With their relationship being what it was, it was definitely odd for a demon to have been in a human town. In other words, there would've had to be a good goddamn reason for it.

That being the case, the human necromancers in league with the demon—or demons, I dunno how many of them there are—might've mistaken me for an ally. They wouldn't have thought that I was just a regular ol' demon tourist chillaxing. My guess was that they'd figured I was a secret intelligence operative or something dispatched by their demon allies, hence he'd been so shocked when he'd yelled at me. *Too bad for him I had been a regular ol' demon tourist chillaxing.*

Admittedly, I could see my theory being kinda far-fetched. If I ended up being wrong, well, that was that. But I couldn't shake the feeling that I was onto something. Humans and demons. I just *knew* there was a connection there. *Argh, why the hell do I have to use what few brain cells I have obsessing over some stupid conspiracy?!*

I was *beyond* done with all this. Don't get me wrong, I enjoyed untangling conspiracies and stuff in games, but having to do it IRL was peak bullshit. I was exhausted. *Pleeese, cut me some slack. I can't take it anymore.* I just wanted to go home ASAP. And then, once I got there, I didn't want to think about anything except the best ways to spend lazy, peaceful days in my beloved dungeon.

In the middle of the little pity party I was holding to brood over the sorry state of my life, something dove at my waist.

“Hellooo! Mr. Herooo!”

Looking down, I saw a little girl in a dress clinging to me. It was the princess—the same kid who’d been tortured by that perverted jerkoff, but she’d completely recovered. She had a big smile on her face and was so full of energy that she was practically bouncing.

“Oh, she’s all good now, huh? That’s great.”

“Indeed, and it’s all thanks to you. I am much obliged.”

Right now, I was in the king’s office. It was just me and him, with him sitting on the sofa across from me. No, wait. The princess had hopped in, so there were three of us. The king had made sure that no guards or attendants would be here since we’d be discussing sensitive info. I appreciated that he trusted me enough to do that. *But damn, King, a biiiit careless of you, innit? It helps me out, so I’m cool with it, but like...*

“Mr. Hero! Would you tell me why you’re wearing a mask?”

“Uhhh... About that, Your Highn—”

“Please call me Ilyr!”

“Oh, um, sure... Right, then, Ilyr, listen up. The truth is, I’m not a hero. I’m a suuuper-duper bad demon lord. I’m wearing this mask so no one finds out who I really am. Here, check out my wings. Veery scary, right?”

Since the king was the only other person in this room, I was free to go all in on using my wings and my voice to try to scare her. I was afraid that if I didn’t, she’d end up getting attached to me, and for whatever reason, my sixth sense was whispering to me that it would be a terrible idea for us to get any friendlier. There was nothing around, but I still felt a terrible chill in the air.

“Woow! What wonderful wings you have! Okay, so you’re a dee-min lord, Mr. Hero!”

Unfortunately, my plan was a bust. The princess’s eyes were sparkling. Instead of being terrified, she looked delighted. *Ugh, I’ve done it now. Mission failed.*

“Then, Mr. Heroic Dee-min Lord, will you carry me off?”

The little princess uttered those words out of nowhere.

“Huh? Wait, what?”

“That’s what demon lords do, yes? They kidnap princesses. So please, do run off with me!”

“O-Oh. W-Well, I guess you’re not wrong. I-If I ever feel up to it, I’ll do just that.”

“Lovely! I’ll be waiting for you!”

I couldn’t help but smile wryly at her enthusiastic reply. Then, I turned to stare the king down.

“Yo, King, lose the grin and do something about this. If you don’t, your daughter’s gonna end up abducted by an evil demon lord.”

“Gah ha, that certainly would be troublesome, hm? Should that day come, I will happily pray for my daughter’s well-being on her new journey. Though I’m sure I’ll be crying while I’m at it.”

Bah.

Once King Smiley had gotten his fill of enjoyment from our little back-and-forth, he spoke gently to the little girl.

“Ilyr, I’d like to speak to him alone now. Please go wait in the other room.”

“Understood, Father. Well, then, Mr. Dee-min Lord, I’ll see you later!”

I guess that’s my name now as far as she’s concerned, huh? Without throwing a tantrum or anything, she bobbed her head at me before trotting off toward the exit on her tiny legs. With a wave of her little hand, she left the room.

“You cannot fathom my joy at seeing that child in such high spirits.”

The king murmured once the princess had left.

“Yeah, I get that. Especially after what happened to her. She’s a tough little thing, huh?”

Any other kid would have a massively hard time trusting others if they’d gone through something that horrific. The fact that she could still smile the way she did showed just how much inner strength she had.

“That is thanks to you as well. You truly saved us. I will forever be grateful for that.”

“Eh, don’t worry about it. I did what I had to do, is all.”

I shrugged at the king’s emotional words.

“It certainly isn’t anywhere near a true token of my appreciation, but please don’t hesitate to tell me if there is anything you wish for. You are quite literally our country’s savior, so I will do my best to accommodate any requests you make.”

“Huh? Um, you’re kinda putting me on the spot here...”

A lot had gone down, most of it bad, but I’d basically accomplished my goal, sooo... But hey, having an IOU from someone as powerful as him was a hell of a bonus. As long as he was alive, I figured the people of this country wouldn’t bother me.

More than that, my dungeon originally existed within Lefi’s domain, and that had been feared for a long time now. Assuming all the shady shit was done with, the dungeon’s safety would be pretty much guaranteed. I mean, who would willingly step foot into territory controlled by this world’s most powerful being? Though technically it was her former domain now.

Even without her around, that forest was called “Demonic” for a reason. The swarms of terrifying beasts weren’t just for show. They

were a lot like chimimoryo, those mythological river and mountain monsters. In this specific instance, it would be safe to assume that no one would be stupid enough to just stroll in unless they had business to take care of, right?

I'll push him a little on that front, then.

"Well, my biggest desire is security. Moving forward, I'd like you to update the law to include no trespassing in the deepest parts of the Demonic Forest. The outer parts are fair game, though."

Up until now, several adventurers had made their way into the Forest, but nowhere near as many as there had been in the army that had invaded. If more adventurers wanted to venture in, I didn't care so long as they didn't cross the boundary line I'd just set.

"Understood. Rather, the Demonic Forest wasn't a place that humans could easily navigate in the first place. To prevent further loss of life, I will officially make it part of the public records that the land belongs to you. I will designate it as an inviolable region. Curbing the adventurers may present some difficulty, but their temperaments are such that they're naturally sensitive to danger. Only the utterly rash would dare tread the area under the Supreme Dragon's rule."

"You sure that's a good idea? It'd be great for me because we'd have an actual agreement in place, but it won't cause any issues for you?"

This was basically a secret treaty with a demon lord, a race known to fight humans—no, not just humans, but many other groups of people too. It definitely had the potential to cause the country serious harm. When I asked him my questions with a dubious look on my face, the king nodded confidently.

"It should not be a problem to make the document confidential. Though only those in the royal bloodline will be privy to the record itself, that will not invalidate its efficacy in controlling the army's movements. However, it behooves me to ask if *you* are amenable to this. The Supreme Dragon poses a threat to you as well, correct? I fully acknowledge your abilities, but even so, were something to happen, would you stand a chance of winning?"

"Oh, there's no worries there. I'm, uh...friends? Yeah, I'm friends with the Supreme Dragon, and we've already hashed things out on that front."

I'd asked Miss Lefi the deadbeat about her territory one time. She'd said, "My domain? Hmm, yes, I vaguely recall its existence now. But wait. Did I not offer it all to you quite a while ago?" Ergo, it was all mine in both name and substance. Still, though, there were still parts of the Forest that I hadn't made part of the dungeon's territory yet. Once I went home, I planned on leveling up the dungeon and then going on more expansion runs with Rir. Good times.

“A friend of the Supreme Dragon... If anyone else had said that to me, I would have laughed in their face for spinning such a tale. Considering the fact that you actually live there, however... Yes, I understand. If you say it’s fine, then I will take you at your word. I’ll have the document prepared right away. Is there anything else?”

“Huh? Anything... Oh, yeah. Think I could get a travel permit? If you have something that’ll let me go around the country freely, that’d be great.”

A free pass, in other words. I had my adventurer ID, of course, but a passport handed down by the king himself had to be way more useful. Something like that would probably make sightseeing with Iluna and the others a lot easier too.

“Oh ho. What a fascinating request. I certainly don’t mind, though you will make certain to protect your true identity, yes? It’s not my place to say, but I will be unable to defend you should it be discovered you’re a demon. That is how deeply rooted the strife between humans and demons has been for ages now.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ll find a way to manage. And I definitely don’t plan on causing any trouble for you either.”

Why would I when even the Church folks hadn’t figured out who I really was? As far as I was concerned, I figured I’d be all right for the most part. The problem was everyone else. If I did eventually decide to hang out and explore human towns, I knew I’d run into more magical tools like the machine from that border town that could determine people’s races. I needed to have a countermeasure ready for that sort of thing.

Maaan, I really wanna have fun with the fam-bam. Especially Iluna and Shii. I wanted to show them the world outside our dungeon. Mm, but taking Shii would be real tough considering her pale blue body. No, hang on. I didn’t have to stick to visiting human towns. There were demi-human and therianthrope towns too. It wasn’t like everything and everyone was my enemy, so settlements with demon folks were totally viable. I was sure there would be quite the mix of races living in those places, and that meant there was no reason to disguise myself. *Nice. Very nice.* I’d have to plan a trip soon.

“Understood. Then I’ll have that ready for you as well.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it. How long will it take?”

“Hmm. No more than an hour, I believe. Do you plan on departing immediately? I would very much like to treat you to dinner. That’s the least I can do, if you’ll allow it.”

The king could tell just by looking at me that I wanted to go home before the day was over. He looked a bit disappointed, but he accepted the rejection with grace and didn’t push it any further.

“Ah, don’t get me wrong, I’m happy to hear that, but the truth is

that I left my buddy waiting outside the capital.”

“Oh, I welcome any of your comrades.”

“Well, it’s not quite that simple. He is my friend, but he’s also my pet wolf. A fenrir, to be exact. That’s not really gonna fly, is it?”

“A fenrir? Do you mean the legendary monster?”

“Yeaahh.”

“I... I believe I’ll refrain from commenting on talk of such a great creature spilling so casually from your lips. In any case, it shouldn’t be a problem. There are monster tamers within the ranks of adventurers, so as long as you submit a registration for any familiars, you can bring them within the capital. Even monsters.”

“Wh-Whoa, for real? Hmm...”

I definitely wanted to get back to the dungeon as soon as possible. Buuut I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t intrigued by the prospect of castle cuisine. Like, come on. Castle. Cuisine. Wouldn’t *you* wonder what kind of delicious things would be on the menu in a place like this? Hell to the yes, you would.

Taking advantage of my uncertainty, the king pressed his point.

“If I were to let the country’s hero leave so unceremoniously, my dignity would be impugned. And above all else, Ilyr would be tremendously saddened.”

“The country’s hero? That’s a bit of an exaggeration... Hey, wait a minute. You’ve been trying to keep me here all this time just for your daughter, haven’t you?”

“Hmph, you only just realized? Rest assured, it will only be those who I trust in attendance.”

It was obvious from the way his lips were twitching cheerfully that the king didn’t feel any guilt or shame over his actions. I laughed wryly at his attitude, then, with a, “I know when I’ve been had. Guess I’ll stick around for dinner,” I nodded in agreement.



After my conversation with the king was over, I left the capital to call Rir. I asked him to shrink himself down to about the size of a regular wolf, and then the two of us headed to the city’s gates. There was some confusion at that point, but thanks to the king’s assistance, it wasn’t too much of a hassle. The familiar registration went off without a hitch, and once it was done, an old man who was most likely a castle butler took Rir and me to the castle in a carriage. I felt kinda bad for the horses pulling the thing since they’d seemed terrified of Rir.

“Hmm. So this is a fenrir? It’s much smaller than I anticipated.”

“Mr. Wolf is so adorable!”

Picking up what the royal father and daughter were putting down,

I asked Rir to go back to his original form. He grew rapidly, reaching his normal size within seconds. Stunned by what he saw, a nearby soldier immediately drew his weapon, but then he spied the familiar registration tag I'd placed on Rir's collar. It told him that Rir was a verified familiar, so he let out a sigh of relief before lowering his weapon. *Sorry for freaking you out, pal.*

"What in blue blazes?! That's... That's incredible. Truly a legendary monster."

"Woow! Mr. Wolf got huuuge!"

The king and princess had completely different reactions. While the king had equal parts awe and fear in his eyes, the princess's shone with delight. She wasn't afraid of Rir in the least, to the point that she latched on to his front legs and buried her face happily in his fluffy fur.



Huh. I wonder why kids are so much less timid than adults. Iluna had reacted pretty much the same way when she'd first met—er, summoned—Rir. If it'd been me who saw something like him pop up out of nowhere, I would've shit my pants.

In any case, that was how we passed the time that day. When night fell, I was brought to a room a bit higher up in the castle so that I could enjoy the nightscape of the royal capital.

"Oh, wow! What a beautiful view!"

"Yeah, it really is."

The girl next to me, the hero, was totally right. In the city surrounding the castle, houses and buildings were lined up in neat rows, standing side by side. The lights coming from each of them just barely lit up the capital, making for a fantasy-like setting. With the atmosphere around my own castle being pretty darn bleak, I had to admit that I maybe sorta lost in the scenery category. Just a wee bit.

Currently in this room were the king and his daughter, me, and the rescue mission MVPs, Nell and Carlotta the lady knight. Outside of us, there were a few maids and butlers going about their duties. *He wasn't kidding about keeping this dinner small.*

He'd mentioned that he would hold a separate banquet on another day to recognize the rest of the knights and soldiers who'd helped save him. Rir was a participant too, although technically he was out on the balcony. Earlier, he'd decided to take a stroll on it, and now, he was sprawled out up there and relaxing. I guess he was being considerate by not getting in our way. I'd bet anything that that thoughtfulness of his would've made him super popular if he were a human.

"Your Majesty, we're deeply thankful for your gracious invitation."

"Please, there's no need to be so formal considering that you all saved me. This is the least I can do to show my gratitude. So be at ease, otherwise this feast will stifle under the yokes of ceremony."

"Understood! I appreciate your kindness."

While Carlotta and the king had their mature discussion, the princess grabbed my and the hero's hands and led us to our seats.

"Mr. Dee-min Lord! Miss Nell! Come on, over here."

"Yes, yes, we're right behind you. Hey, Mr. Wye. Does Lady Ilyr's appellation for you mean you told her the truth?"

Nell's quiet whisper had me smiling sheepishly before I answered her.

"I just kinda went with the flow. Probably not a big deal since people usually write it off when kids say weird stuff like that. By the way, I didn't know you knew her."

"Indeed, I do. Being a hero and all, we've met on several

occasions.”

With everyone chatting away in their seats, maids started appearing from the back room, carrying plates of food to the table.

“Daaang. Everything looks so good.”

“O-Oh my gosh, Mr. Wye! This may be the first time I’ve ever had such a lavish meal!”

Nell and I were both pumped. All the different dishes they’d put in front of us were making my mouth water. Even just the smell of them had my stomach growling.

“Tee hee hee! This was all made by our family’s amazing chefs!”

Sitting next to us was the wee little princess, her chest puffed up with pride and a satisfied expression on her face. *So cute.*

Once all the food had been placed on the table and all our glasses filled with wine—except the princess’s, which was full of grape juice—the king politely commanded our attention with a “Now, then.”

“Everyone, you truly saved us. Though meager, I offer you this token of my appreciation. Please, eat to your hearts’ content; you needn’t hold yourselves back. So, let us raise our glasses for a toast. Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

After the king’s short speech, we all sipped our drinks. The alcohol warmed me right up. *Ahhh. Delicious.* I was no wine connoisseur, so I didn’t actually know much about the stuff, but even *I* could tell that this particular wine was delicious. It was so smooth and flavorful that I could see myself drinking a whoooole lot of it.

In the seat next to me, the hero looked like she was positively melting when she sipped her wine. *Hey, wait just a goddamn minute.* She was sucking the stuff down like it was water, but there was no way she was old enough to drink. *Oh, wait, we’re not on Earth.* Maybe this world didn’t have age minimums for drinking.

Once she tried the wine, Carlotta said, “Hm, yes, exquisite... Might this be a product of the Sandeljoux region?” That got her and the king chatting away about wine. *Damn, she really is a big shot in a lot of ways, huh?* It was obvious that she was used to drinking. And judging by her discussion with the king, she was no stranger to the good stuff.

Some time later, having seen how much we’d enjoyed the wine, the king said he’d give each of us a few bottles as souvenirs. I’d gladly accept that gift. When I got home, I definitely wanted Lefi and the maids to try it. All the better if Lefi drank herself silly. *Not me wanting to see her get totally shit-faced. No, sirree.*

We thanked him for his thoughtful offer, then everyone dug into the food. Up until this point, everything had been going swimmingly. Just dandy. We were all enjoying the amazing food and drinks, laughing, chatting, and having an all-around fun time. But only up

until this point.

The problem... The problem was when everyone started getting good and toasted.

“Hue hue hue hue, Mishhhtur Wyeee, are youuu drinkin’? Heeey, you’re not drinkin’ a thing. Tha’sh okay, lemme pour ya one. Hue hue hue hue hue, here ya gooo!”

The hero grabbed my arm and leaned against it while dumping wine into my glass.

“Yeesh! All right, I get it, I’ll drink! That’s plenty, thanks! Seriously, that’s good enough! It’s gonna spill!”

I yanked the bottle from her hand as I watched my glass nearly overflow from her overly enthusiastic refill. The wine was sloshing around dangerously close to the rim.

“Alllll rrrighty, Mishtur, III’ll help ya drink it! Hue hue hue, c’mon, now... Huh? Can’t drink? What a shhhelfish boy. Guesh I got no choice but to make ya shwallow it m’self, moufff to mouf.”

“Jesus, woman! Tone it down! Don’t get any closer to me! I’ll drink it! I’ll drink it, you alkie!”

Snatching my glass back from her as her lips drew dangerously close, I downed the whole thing in one gulp. *Gah... There’s a hole burning in my guts...*

“Hue hue hue. Oookaaay, I’ll help ya eat next. Heeere, say ‘aaaahhh.’”

“Stop, you maniac! That’s not my mouth! Ow! That’s hot as balls! Okay, you win, I’ll eat it! I’m opening my mouth, see?! Aahhh!”

She tried to shove the food in places that were decidedly not my mouth like she was on some comedy show, so mostly out of desperation, I opened my mouth wide and bit down on the fork she was shoving at me.

“Ish it goooood? Reaaally? Have another, then. Say ‘saaahhh’ again.”

“Goddammit, Nell! You’re totally sloshed!”

The hero was *plastered*. Not too long ago, while venting about how she’d grown up poor, she’d mentioned that she never got to drink high-quality wine. That was why she’d gotten so carried away and basically chugged it during dinner. And if all her slurring was any indication, she was the kind of drunk that couldn’t figure out how to talk while simultaneously wanting to spoil—or should I say smother in affection—those around her.

Alcohol also apparently turned the hero into one hell of a flirt. She was sexier and more outrageous, but I knew it was just the booze talking. I’d had a lot to drink too, though that was because I’d been forced to drink a lot, so this whole situation had me in physical pain.

Thanks to my demon lord body, I was only a little tipsy, but if I had to keep this pace up, it'd be unbearable. Game over for me. Pretty sure my stomach would burst before I even got to the point of actually being drunk.

"Hee hee hee, it's Mr. Dee-min Lord's scent. Tee hee hee, Mr. Dee-min Lord..."

And then there was the little princess who'd set up camp on my lap. She snuggled me hard, her head burrowing happily into my chest. She'd been like this for a while now. I felt like this was her way of marking her territory. *No, could she have gotten drunk off the smell of the wine?* It was a possibility...

"Zzz..."

As for the king sitting across from me, the dude was asleep. He had just been watching everyone's shenanigans with a silly grin on his face and acting like none of this was his problem. And then, when I looked back after being distracted, the old man had already conked out.

You bet your ass that bugged the crap out of me. But also, I could relate. A lot of crazy stuff—too much, really—had gone down recently, so he must've been exhausted. I *did* want to yell at him that the dang host shouldn't be taking a friggin' nap, but since I'd gotten to know him better, I couldn't think of the king as anything except a middle-aged man worn out from his job. *Do your best, Mr. Dad.*

Oh, I just realized that we were missing a person. I looked around the room, trying to find said person.

"Ahhh... Sooo fluffy... You truly are such an amazing creature of fluff. Will you consent to becoming mine? I promise to fluff your fluff for the rest of our lives."

Carlotta, who should have been the epitome of a no-nonsense woman, was apparently no match for the wine either. She had essentially buried her entire body in Rir's fur as he lay stretched out on the balcony and was rubbing him nonstop. My faithful, beloved pet stared at me pleadingly, looking deeply troubled, but I turned away and pretended I'd never noticed him.

Forgive me, Rir. I had too much on my plate right now. *I'm so sorry, buddy, but I need you to be a noble sacrifice on the altar of drunken idiots.*

"Hmphhh, Mishhhtur Wye, dontcha know ish rude to get dishtraced when you're eatin'? Bad boysh like you get punished. Now youuu gotta feed meee. Tell me to shay 'aahhh.'"

"Tee hee hee, Mr. Dee-min Lord. Mr. Dee-min Lord..."

Screw this! I cannot deal with this much chaos!



"Haah... Jeeesus..."

I lifted the sleeping princess off my lap and handed her off to a maid who'd been watching us make fools of ourselves with a smile on her face. Then, I collapsed back in my chair with the heaviest sigh ever heaved. I'd ended up getting cornered by the hero, who was a *terrible* drunk, and forced to chug a buttload of alcohol. I couldn't remember the last time I'd drank so much. I didn't feel like I was gonna puke it back up thanks to my demonic body, but having that much liquid in my stomach was definitely making me bloated.

Man, oh, man, I had never been more grateful to be a demon lord than I was today. I almost felt like this bizarre spectacle was on par with my fights against that battle maniac and the enormous Undead thing, so I was supremely thankful to this demon lord body for allowing me to endure all kinds of insane activities—having alcohol poured down my throat being one of them, apparently.

Speaking of the hammered hero, she was currently passed out on my shoulder. Most of the time, she was a normal, lovely young lady, so I couldn't say that the softness of her body pressed against mine wasn't nice, but behind that innocent sleeping face lurked a beast of a heavy drinker. She was the one who'd coerced me over and over again into drinking, so more than anything, I felt intense aggravation. *If I had a pen, I would scribble all over her face.* That should tell you how ticked off I was.

"Actually, I *do* have oil-based paints in Inventory... Nah. I'll let her off the hook. Just this once, though."

Being careful not to wake her up, I shifted her head so it was lying on my seat before standing up.

"Rir."

A little bit ago, Rir had made his escape to hang out near me, having shrunk himself down to the size of a normal wolf. When I called out to him, he immediately understood what I wanted and moved next to me.

"May I help you with something?"

A maid on standby near the wall approached us, clearly thinking we needed help.

"Oh, I'm heading home. Mind telling the king we had a good time?"

Halfway through his doze, said king had fallen into a genuinely deep sleep. When his butler noticed, he'd bowed his head to us—well, just me since I was the only one still sober and relatively alert—then hoisted the king onto his shoulder and carried him off, presumably to his bedroom.

"You would depart? But it is so late. Might you consider staying the night?"

"Sorry, but no. The plan was always to leave today. Thanks

anyway.”

Plus, I got the feeling that staying the night would trap me here for a lot longer than I wanted to be here. The tiny princess would never let me leave because I was still a typical Japanese person deep down, which meant I couldn't say no when someone was more overbearing than me. We won't talk about the fact that this particular someone was a little girl.

The maid responded with “Understood,” then suggested I use a carriage to transport me as far as the royal capital's main entrance. I politely declined her offer, though, 'cause I was gonna ride on Rir's back the whole way home.

Just as I was about to leave the room, I heard a voice.

“Mm... You are departing?”

A quick glance told me the voice belonged to Carlotta. Until a second ago, she'd been out cold on a couch in a corner of the room, her arms folded, dead to the world. *Maybe we were too noisy and woke her up.* Not unexpected since she was basically a soldier. Even with alcohol in her system, I figured she slept lightly enough that she could respond quickly to any kind of situation.

“Yeah. Thanks for everything; I appreciate it. Tell that to Nell too, would ya?”

“Hmph. If anything, we should be thanking *you*. You assisted us in many ways during this incident. The Church will always welcome you should you choose to join us. And if you run into any trouble, don't hesitate to summon me. I'm sure Nell would be happy to lend you a hand as well.”

“If I did that, wouldn't I just end up becoming a part of the Church?”

“Well, I would certainly do my best to encourage that course of events. What? Don't look at me like that. I have no ill intentions.”

I smiled ruefully at how nonchalantly Carlotta said that.

“Oh, right. Mask, I forgot to ask you one thing.”

“Yeah? What's up?”

“When we were in the audience chamber, you burst in through the window. How exactly did you manage that feat from your position?”

“Uhhh...”

Wearing an unapologetic smirk, I answered her question.

“Truth is, I can fly.”

Not giving her a chance to respond, I waved my hand carelessly and finally left the room.



“Wait! Mr. Wye!”

At that moment, I was walking away from the castle using the directions the maid had given me. When I turned around, I saw the hero staggering out of the castle, massaging her head as she chased after me.

“Oh? I didn’t know you were awake, Nell.”

“Y-Yeah, I am. My head is pounding, though...”

“No shit, Sherlock. You probably drank your weight in wine. You reap what you sow and all that jazz.”

My scowl got a muffled “Hrk!” and a strong blush out of her. Based on that, I could tell she remembered what she’d done to me.

“U-Um, I’m sorry. Everything just got so much more fun once I started drinking, and...”

“Oh, for the love of... You need to be careful, all right? If it hadn’t been me, the most gentlemanly of gentlemen, next to you, you probably would’ve been attacked.”

“I’d like to formally object to that ‘most gentlemanly of gentlemen’ bit... Anyway, don’t worry about me! I definitely don’t make it a habit to drink that much with men I don’t know or in places where I can’t let my guard down!”

She stuck her chest out proudly as she said that.

“Huh. Then that means you let your guard down with me?”

“Well, I trust that you would never do something so awful, Mr. Yuki. Plus, even if you *did* try something suspicious, all I’d have to do is run crying to Lefi, so I’ll be fine regardless.”

“Holy shit, no. Don’t even *joke* about that. Just imagining her reaction is gonna make me piss myself.”

I laughed wryly at her self-satisfied expression before continuing.

“All right then, Nell. It wasn’t long, but I still enjoyed our time together.”

“Me too. I had a lot of fun with you, Mr. Yuki. I’m a bit sad that we have to go our separate ways, but...but it’s not like this is a final farewell, right?”

“You know it. Stop by the dungeon anytime. You’ve got a free pass from the dungeon to travel safely all the way to our place. We’ll be waiting for you.”

“Okay! I’ll definitely visit again soon. And when that day comes, you’d better be prepared! I won’t be the same scared, quaking girl I was, afraid of the big bad demon lord like the first time. I’ll be more like a real hero, thank you very much!”

“I’m looking forward to that.”

Sending one last smile her way, I hopped on to Rir, who’d returned to his usual size. Then, on an impulse, I opened Inventory.

“Oh, yeah, Nell. You can have this.”

“Huh? Wooow!”

I pulled something out of the rift and tossed it her way. Panicked, Nell caught the dagger, which was still in its sheath.

“What is it?”

“I made it. Never actually used it, though.”

When she pulled it partially out of its scabbard, the moonlight reflected brilliantly off the blade. Nell murmured softly at the sight.

“How lovely...”



Tsukihana: Created by the demon lord Yuki, this dagger boasts a snow-white blade. Its sparkle can cut through the darkest night with a piercing beam of light. Quality: A+.

The weapon's name was Tsukihana, meaning "moon" and "bloom." Not long ago, I'd gotten curious about the special properties of magical metals, and in an attempt to learn more about them, I'd conducted various experiments. One of those experiments involved the super-rare mineral adamantite, which I'd used to create this dagger.

I was confident in what that dagger could do, to the point that I felt no shame in bragging about it. But because I had other knives for daily use, I'd never actually gotten around to using it. It had just been sitting neglected in Inventory this whole time. Since my main weapon was a greatsword and my secondary the magic pistol, I didn't really see myself using it in battle. Even without those factors, though, I figured it'd be too much for me to handle without the Dagger Combat ability.

"That thing's damn strong, so it'd be great if you could use it as a backup weapon. You could even use it like a regular knife to cut stuff up or whatever."

After staring in awe at the dagger for a while longer, she slipped it back into its sheath. Then, clutching it to her chest, she spoke.

"Thank you, Mr. Yuki. I'm so incredibly happy. I'll take good care of this. I'll cherish it, I swear."

She nodded resolutely, all the emotions hidden inside her visible in her beautiful smile.

"Right. I'll hold you to that. I'm off, Nell."

"Bye-bye, Mr. Yuki."

With one last backward glance at Nell as she waved, I gave the Rir the signal to take off. And just like that, we raced off into the darkness that blanketed the royal capital.

Side Story 2: Reyd Glorio Alisia

“We shall now commence the annual council of lords.”

Following that announcement, King Reyd Glorio Alisia spoke while reviewing the sheaf of documents before him.

“I will get right to the heart of the matter. Should Marquis Reluga and Margrave Dague be so brazen as to reveal themselves, they are to be captured on the spot. Should they remain in hiding, we will dispatch military personnel to seize them as insurgents. Make the preparations.”

“At once, Your Majesty. What are your thoughts regarding the food supply shortage in the royal capital?”

“That is a result of the royal family’s—no, of my own negligence. I will use capital from my own assets to fund ration purchases from the merchants. We will combine those supplies with the ones confiscated by the military and distribute them to the populace. In addition, I will make certain to cover any losses incurred by merchants because of the recent incident. If we still fall short of the necessary monies, you are free to sell the castle’s furnishings to make up the difference.”

Upon handing out those instructions, the king suddenly sensed something out of place in the air. With a “Hm?” he looked up from his papers. What he saw was his right-hand man grinning broadly at him for some unknown reason. This man had served as his retainer since before he ascended the throne. Moreover, he trusted him more than anyone else, allowing him to be responsible for a great many tasks.

During the failed rebellion, more than half of the king’s trusted subordinates had either died or been incarcerated. Yet somehow, this man had succeeded in escaping from the castle right before he would have been captured. After that, he had managed to survive by evading the soldiers’ attention. So the king had been informed by the holy knights. They had also told him about his confidante’s further activities throughout the ordeal. He had provided details of the castle’s construction to the knights, as well as made contact with several forces outside of the Church to recruit more allies. In short, he had been quite busy behind the scenes, working hard to rescue the king.

Throughout the upheaval, the king had unfortunately assumed that this man, whom he considered to be a dear friend, had perished. To have found him alive and well amidst the unrelenting chain of

sorrow had brought unimaginable joy to His Majesty.

“Your expression puzzles me.”

“Well, I’m simply overjoyed to see Your Majesty so energetic once more.”

The king smiled dryly at his consigliere’s words.

“Tis only natural. How else would I be able to sort through all these documents?”

“Even so, I feel your spirit from years gone by, Your Majesty. Having attended you for so long now, seeing you like this calls to mind fond memories, and that brings me great happiness.”

“Indeed...”

I can thank that man for this change in me as well, hm?

“Your Majesty?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Let us proceed as I directed.”

“Yes, my lord. Consider it done.”

After he saw his trusted adviser off, the king reflected deeply for some time.

A man had appeared before the king himself as he lay imprisoned in the dungeon. That mysterious young man had come to rescue him, but he had also done so much more. He could have easily kept quiet and forced the king into his debt from that act alone. Instead, however, he deliberately revealed himself to be a demon and casually spoke of his true goal.

Humans and demons. The history of conflict between these two species was extensive. Skirmishes broke out frequently even in the present, and in recent years, extremists who touted the principle of human supremacy had gained considerable support. Due to the rise of this ideal, humans had decided to oppose not only demons, but demi-humans and therianthropes as well. A tale as old as time, unfortunately.

The king personally deemed it incredibly foolish for humans to fight others possessed of essentially the same human lineage, yet if he were to make such a belief public, it would likely be considered a weakness. That had the potential to cause a great deal of harm to the nation.

Declaring war to be futile and insisting on peace at any cost was a mindset with its own demerits too. If he were to lay down arms entirely and wave the proverbial white flag, it wouldn’t just be the demons’ relentless assaults he would have to worry about. There was the matter of humans on the same side as theirs betraying and leading their own attacks on him and his people. As head of state, it was easy for him to envision such a future. Once discord was sown, it was not something that could be resolved within the span of a day.

The king having been imprisoned rather than executed was

related to the races' hostile relationship. The reason behind that decision was that whoever was responsible for the incident had wanted information on the nation's secret art, Incantation Magic. As a country with incredible might and a lengthy history, it was considered a major power by its neighbors. That was precisely why it had been exposed to danger on innumerable occasions thus far.

Among those episodes, there were a few crises that had put the country on the verge of perishing. In the event that such disastrous circumstances befell the kingdom again, a final defensive measure had been passed down for generations through the royal dynasty. It was a measure only the king himself knew of, and the villain's purpose had been to obtain that valuable knowledge.

He had interrogated the king himself and used his daughter as a tool in his vile attempts to force out the secret. Just thinking of that hellspawn made the king feel filthy. He didn't know how the mastermind, or masterminds, had learned about his family's secret, but it was entirely possible that the demon who'd been controlling his son had planned to root out the information under cover of the chaos he had bred.

At the time, the king hadn't been aware that the true villain was a demon. However, given the historical circumstances, if an unfamiliar demon were to suddenly appear before him like their mysterious savior had in the castle dungeon, it would only be natural to question what their aim was.

Nevertheless, when that young man had healed his daughter, the king had glimpsed eyes filled with gentleness behind his mask. With that scene seared in his mind, the king had afterward found it impossible to believe him hostile to humans. As far as he was concerned, that demon was just a kind young man possessed of his own unique character. Furthermore, the king had chosen to place his faith in him as that kind young man; that he was a demon was of no consequence.

The king's judgment had quickly proven correct. If it hadn't been for that young man, his country might now be lying in ruins, exactly as the evildoers had intended. If it hadn't been for him, he might never have seen his daughter smile again—not while bearing those heavy wounds that couldn't be healed. There had been every likelihood of her being killed in front of his very eyes. And if it hadn't been for him, he never would have known the truth about the horror that had overtaken his son, Lute. Suffocated only by doubt and despair, the king would have left his mortal coil behind in that cell.

A shudder racked his body as he pondered what had almost come to pass. Truly, as both a king and father, he could never repay that young man for everything he'd done. That wasn't to say he didn't have

thoughts about him being a demon, however. He would be lying if he claimed otherwise.

He was quite certain of the fact that the adversary slinking behind the one who had manipulated his son from the shadows was a demon as well. So as not to deceive his own heart, he would admit that he held some hatred toward those individuals. Perhaps, though, the time had come to look beyond grudges.

That evil demon had been wearing an orb-shaped magical tool to hide his true identity. When the royal magicians had conducted an analysis of the item, they had concluded its probable origin as the Reauxgard Empire, a major power located to the southeast of the Kingdom of Alisia. Situated in the lower part of the continent, the Reauxgard Empire was dominated by humans. Its current emperor had launched many a war of conquest, which had led surrounding nations to view it as a tremendous threat.

In short, the question now was how demons had managed to procure magical equipment manufactured in a country inhabited predominantly by humans, who should have been their enemies. There was a possibility that he had pillaged it from somewhere, but in the same vein, there was also a possibility that that *wasn't* the case. Theoretically, humans and demons were consorting with each other. The king possessed a single piece of evidence to substantiate that hypothesis: the conjurers mixed in with the capital's soldiers, part of his son's faction.

Most of them had been mercenary necromancers his son—no, the demon controlling his son—had employed from outside their nation. But within their ranks had been a number of individuals with completely unknown backgrounds. Interrogating a few of them had uncovered that they were likely intelligence operatives from a foreign country. Unfortunately, the king's people hadn't been able to glean more details, such as the name of the country they were from, before they'd all died abruptly. Their deaths had been brought on by a mysterious technique to silence them before they could reveal any further information.

Human spies working for demons. As far as the king was concerned, it would be immensely difficult to pass this off as a mere coincidence. He continued to ruminate in silence. Positioned as a great power itself, the Kingdom of Alisia could maintain military equilibrium with the Reauxgard Empire. But if the kingdom were to collapse from within, that balance would be destroyed, and the empire, so fervently obsessed with territorial expansion, would leap with joy.

Furthermore, the magical equipment produced by Alisia was the cornerstone of their allied forces' battle against the demon species. His country's destruction would mean a significant weakening of the

humans' might against demons. Without a doubt, that would give the demons a cause for celebration as well.

Regardless, the reality was that the Reauxgard Empire was also at war with demons. As such, the king found it extremely hard to imagine they were in league with each other, but it was still wholly appropriate for one who bore the burden of his nation to anticipate the worst-case scenario. *I must shore up our defenses*. In order to both repel those who would target his country and protect all those who lived within its borders, it was necessary to search for even more defensive measures.

“It was quite fortuitous that I made his acquaintance.”

Under these circumstances, the king felt that he was unbelievably lucky to have formed a bond of fellowship with that talented, charming young man. For example, should his worst fears be realized, he could at the very least evacuate his daughter to safety now. His conscience thrummed with guilt at the thought of taking advantage of the young man's goodwill, but he also knew for certain that the other man would protect his daughter if she ever needed help.

Speaking of the little girl, she had taken to the young man so thoroughly that the king was sure her days would be peaceful were he forced to send her his way. Having lost his son, the only thing the king desired now was a world in which his daughter could grow up hale and happy. He sought nothing else.

“It is my fervent wish that that affable young man remains a good neighbor forevermore...”

Chapter 4: Our Heartwarming Dungeon

The warm light of the early afternoon sun beat down on me.

“Ahhh, finally home.”

Those words slipped out as I reached the usual cave entrance. On the way here, I’d taken a short nap, using Rir’s body as a makeshift bed. I’d also taken care of some errands along the way. Between all that, the trip with Nell to the royal capital had gone a lot quicker than the solo trip back, even with Rir going full speed.

One of those errands was taking care of the gang of thieves I’d encountered on the road. I still wasn’t completely sure what all had gone down, but they’d basically attacked me out of desperation. So it had seemed, anyway. Routing them had been easy enough, and while I was at it, I’d found their base nearby and raided it. I stole all their treasure before burning the place to the ground.

To be honest, it had felt a little like *I* was the criminal in that situation. But then I’d checked out the thieves’ titles. Not one of them had had an “I did what I had to to survive” thing going on, so it was whatever. My conscience was clear. After all, for reasons I still didn’t know, I was the Demon Lord of Judgment. They could just think of it as divine—no, demonic punishment.

Instead of attacking me and Rir, if they had just gotten down on their hands and knees and begged me to spare their lives, I would have. Sure, they wouldn’t have been able to hold their swords ever again, but sparing their lives is sparing their lives. Then again, maybe they’d thought I wouldn’t’ve let them go even if they’d asked.

Eh, it be like that sometimes. Real talk, though, finding my first bandit hideout had been a blast. They’d turned an abandoned fortress into their base of operations, so infiltrating and destroying it had made me feel like I was on a quest in one of those old-school RPGs. If the chance to destroy another thieves’ den came up, I’d totally jump on it. It’d be a good way to get my hands on some pricey shit. Never mind that I didn’t have any use for it.

No, wait. That wasn’t entirely true. I’d forgotten because I’d never actually done it, but I could give the dungeon basically anything for it to absorb as sustenance. It didn’t *have* to be monster carcasses. *I think I’ll try that out later. I might be able to get a shit ton of DP.*

Anyway, Rir and I had already gone our separate ways at this

point. I was currently walking through the tunnel, mulling this concept over. When I reached the door that normally connected to the meadow, I turned the knob so that it would take me to the real throne room instead.

“Honeys, I’m hooome!”

“Squeeee! Welcome home, Yukiki!”

Iluna noticed me the second I entered the room. She raced over to me on her tiny feet, flung herself at me, and hugged me tightly.

“Welcome home, Master!”

A step behind her, Shii bounded toward me in a similar manner and wrapped her arms around my waist.

“Hey, hey. I’m back, twinsies.”

As they beamed delightedly up at me, I patted both their heads.

Ahhh, so soothing...

“My lord! Welcome back!”

“Welcome home, Master Demon Lord.”

After thanking the maids for their greetings, I turned my gaze toward the dungeon’s last resident.

“Lefi, I’m home.”

She’d been watching us, so when our eyes finally met, for some reason, her cheeks reddened and she kept opening and closing her mouth. Then, apparently getting fed up with herself, she cleared her throat and did her best to pretend like she hadn’t just been acting funny. *Huh? The hell’s her deal?*

“S-So you have. Indeed, you have returned at long last.”

Lefi made her way over to me and the two little girls who were still dogpiling me. She grabbed the hem of my shirt, fidgeted a bit, and looked up at me shyly before speaking again.

“I-I-I was quite l-lonely without you.”

“Pbbt.”

I sputtered in shock.



“H-Hey, Lefi, you all right there? Didja eat something you shouldn’t’ve? There’s a lot of weird shit growing in the Demonic Forest, y’know. Don’t tell me you got so hungry you actually went scavenging for food?”

“A-As if I would do such a thing, you imbecile!”

Now *that* was more like it. Good ol’ Lefi and her good ol’ harsh retorts. But then, her expression did a one-eighty, going right back to the bashful one she’d just had.

“I... I simply did not imagine that...being unable to see you would be so difficult. That is all.”

“Hrngmbweh?!”

I’d never made a sound like that before in my life. Why was Lefi saying such sweet things? *O-Okay, seriously, what the fuck is wrong, Lefi?! It’s cool, you can tell me! Really! Did we get invaded by body snatchers or something?!*

Lefi was acting unbelievably adorable right now, like a cute baby animal. I just wanted to snatch her up in my arms and take her home. But I also had serious whiplash from her dramatic change in attitude. It just did *not* feel right.

She was behaving so differently it might as well have been a Jekyll and Hyde situation. I was praying so hard that this wasn’t an omen of some kinda future cataclysm. The woman could easily cause disasters if she wanted to, so this really wasn’t a laughing matter for me.

I did a quick check of everyone else to see if they sensed that something was off too. What I saw instead was Lew fist-pumping excitedly and Leila smiling way more than—scratch that, Leila was the same as ever. Really, though, had I crossed over into the Twilight Area? I didn’t have a single clue what was going on.

Wait a minute... Don’t tell me they put some weird idea in her head. As soon as I decided to ask Lefi straight-up if that was what had happened, she made a noise.

“Hm...? Yuki.”

She twitched her nose and sniffed me curiously.

“Wh-What?”

“Hmmm... I smell a woman other than the hero on you, and her scent is quite strong. What is the meaning of this?”

Eek! She knows?!

“I’ve got nothing to feel guilty about. I had a chance to hang out with some kids over there and they just happened to latch on to me. You’re probably just smelling a-a little girl not that much bigger than Iluna. Definitely.”

“Oh ho, truly? In short, then, once more, you have unrepentantly

laid your hands on a young girl and found gratification in the release of your warped *proclivity*? Do I have the right of it?”

“Why do you say it like you think I did something horrible?!”

She was making me out to be a goddamn sex offender! But her savage, ghastly smile had me sweating bullets as I quaked in fear before her. And then...thank the freaking maker, she suddenly came to her senses. She shook her head vigorously and spoke again.

“Fine. I will leave it be. In any case, you must be quite exhausted. Have you eaten lunch?”

“Huh? Uh, n-no, not yet.”

“Hmph. You have impeccable timing, then. We ourselves were just about to partake. You two, release him. We must prepare for our meal.”

“Okaaay!”

“Kay, Lady Lefifi!”

The two little girls replied cheerfully to Lefi and let me go.

“Yuki, you may take a seat and wait.”

“R-Right. Got it.”

Lefi led me to a chair at the dining table and I sat down obediently. With that task complete, she did something that absolutely, positively rocked my world. A truly stunning act I could never have imagined her doing in a million years—she went into the kitchen to grab plates and stuff so she could help set the table.

“What...the hell...happened...while I was gone...?”

Utterly baffled by how completely absurd this was, I just muttered incoherently to myself.



Lefi was still acting strange.

“Hm? Yuki, something is stuck in your hair.”

“O-Oh. Thanks.”

“You are most welcome.”

She stretched her hand out and plucked the lint from my head. I thanked her for it, she nodded appreciatively, and then she casually plopped herself down next to me.

“...”

“...”

“Uhhh... Hate to break it to ya, Miss Lefi, but you’re not gonna see anything interesting no matter how hard you stare at me.”

I’d been practicing my Weapon Enhancement ability to level it up, but I stopped when her watching me like a hawk had gotten to be too much.

“O-Oh, I see. So I cannot watch you?”

“Y-You *can*... I don’t really mind, but, like...”

She'd been doing...whatever this was for a little while now. First, she was always strangely close. Compared to before, the distance between us—like, the literal distance—was much smaller. Anytime she was next to me, she got close enough for some part of our bodies to touch. *Is it hot in here or is it just me?*

Which led to point two: she'd gotten way too touchy-feely. Whenever she needed something from me, she would grab my clothes or lean on me a lot. I'd been jumped from behind a bunch of times like that recently, and every time, I'd turn around expecting it to be Iluna, but I'd find Lefi instead.

Of course, I didn't feel grossed out or anything by her. As a healthy, normal young man, I couldn't help but enjoy the sensation of a young lady's soft body against my own. I would also like to categorically state that I possessed the requisite *parts* that came with being a healthy, normal young man. But my intuition was telling me that Lefi was overdoing whatever it was she was doing.

She blushed all the time, and our conversations all felt sorta awkward too. Thanks to that, even *I* was losing my freaking mind. Now, it definitely wasn't a *bad* look for her—if anything, she was super cute—but no lie, I liked the usual shameless, arrogant version of her better. *Don't push yourself too hard, Lefi. I hope you can go back to normal soon...*

“So, Lew.”

“Ack! Wh-What is it, my lord? I don't like that scary smile on your face.”

Guessing that Lew knew exactly what in the fresh hell was going on, I'd dragged her out to the castle. She had her back literally against a wall and I slapped my hands on it, right above her head. That's right, the so-called kabedon position. Though, naturally, it wasn't the usual sweet-and-sour romantic situation. No, this was a prison designed to threaten her and cage her in so she couldn't escape. Lew flinched at the loud smacking sound, then glanced up at me fearfully.

“Lefi's been acting reeeal weird lately. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?”

“N-No? I don't? I-I don't think her behavior is particularly strange?”

“Huh. You're dead set on telling me that you don't find it weird?”

“L-Lady Lefi is a lady, s-so it isn't unusual if she wishes to carry herself like one.”

“Up until now, she spent more than half of every day sleeping. And when she was awake, all she did was eat or play games. So when someone like that suddenly starts behaving like an actual lady, you don't find it odd? Not even a little bit?”

Lew stayed quiet for a minute.

“A-Anyway, wh-why did you single me out? L-Leila’s here too. Why don’t you ask her? You might find out more if you do.”

Blatantly throwing her coworker under the bus like that meant she must’ve hit her limit on me terrorizing her.

“I’d be in over my head if I tried that and you know it.”

Leila handled all of the housework and was teaching me a lot about magic, though. I couldn’t risk ruining that by questioning her.

“W-Wait, that means I’m just an easy target?!”

“Yeah. You *are* one heck of a clumsy maid, after all.”

“How can you attack my weak point like that?! Especially when you know it bothers me! You’re awful! This is discrimination! It’s tyranny! Can’t you be nicer to me?!”

“Pshhh. Demon lords have always been tyrants, dummy. That’s our thing. You’re only just realizing that now? Besides, I’m plenty nice to you. If it weren’t for me, Rir would never even get near you.”

I gave Lew a smug, taunting smirk. The look on her face said that she *hated* it.

“Urgh! Y-You’re not wrong there...”

“Damn right I’m not. So, back to the topic at hand—what’s going on with Lefi?”

“Umm...you swear you’ll keep it a secret?”

“Yeah. I swear.”

“Really? Truly? You promise? Because if they find out I told you, they’ll turn me into charcoal. I’d rather not end up like that; I still want to enjoy life...”

“Dude, yes, I promise.”

Lew squirmed a bit while trying to make a decision about whether to say anything. Then, finally, she opened her mouth.

“Well...Lady Lefi’s worried.”

“Huh? She is? Are we talking about the same Lefi here?”

The supremely self-centered jerk who acts without any consideration for others? That Lefi? Was worried?

I listened carefully to Lew’s story. From it, I learned that Lefi was determined to learn how to build relationships with people because she didn’t know how to close the emotional distance with others. Yes, *that* Lefi. She was like a little kid who didn’t know how to make friends. Okay, no, that wasn’t a fair judgment since she’d spent her entire life alone. And “her entire life” meant centuries.

So, of course, having never lived together with others, every experience was brand-spanking-new to her. Her lifestyle now was a fun, refreshing change of pace, but she didn’t know how long it would last. She’d realized that her life was fun now because of everyone *else* putting in the effort to get close to her. She, on the other hand, had

done nothing to reciprocate.

Given how long she'd been alive, Lefi understood that if she just kept on enjoying her life while letting everyone else do the work of making it enjoyable, it'd all disappear on her one day. Taking that into account, she'd decided that if she wanted to truly appreciate what she had, she needed to put in some effort of her own. In this case, that meant learning how to create bonds with people. Seemed like she'd figured some stuff out while I was in the royal capital.

She'd apparently quietly confided all of that to Lew and Leila a while ago. Charmed by this unexpectedly vulnerable and adorable side of Lefi, the two had pulled out all the stops to help her overcome her problem. I didn't know the exact details of whatever plans they'd come up with, but suffice to say, they were now her guides on her journey of self-improvement.

Long story short, her recent behavior was the result of following their advice after trying to think of something on her own and coming up empty-handed.

"Gaaah, you've gotta be kidding me..."

I huffed out an amazed laugh. This was so totally like her, but also completely unlike her at the same time. *Jeez, can she get any more awkward?* Lefi was overthinking this so hard, making it a lot more difficult for herself than it needed to be. IMO, she would've been fine just being herself. I could see why it would make her anxious, though, what with her lack of social and life experience and all.

It might not be a problem I should butt into, but it also might not hurt if I go along with this whole thing for a little longer. Might as well, right? As long as nobody died, we'd be together for a veery long time. What did she say? Millenia? Even if she *wasn't* trying, if we had that long to work with, she'd *have* to learn how to get along with others, right?

Should I tell her that she can tone it down a little? If she tried too hard for too long and broke down, I didn't want her going on a rampage. I was a thousand percent sure I wouldn't be able to handle her in that state. To keep that from happening, I figured it'd be a good idea to treat Lefi to the alcohol I'd been gifted. *Today or tomorrow, we're taking a breather.*

"Phew... I managed to gloss things over without him finding out..."

Once she'd confirmed that her employer was no longer nearby, Lew sighed in relief. She'd successfully covered their tracks without outright lying to him. In truth, while her other employer, the young mistress, *did* fret about closing the emotional gap with others, it went a bit deeper than that.

Her lovely mistress's worry wasn't strictly about becoming close to

people in general, but about becoming close to *one specific person*. Just recalling how her mistress had obsessed over the problem in the exact same way a real girl her age would made her feel all warm and fuzzy inside. There was just no way she could reveal such secrets. They weren't hers to share, after all.

"Heh heh heh! Good luck, Lady Lefi! The maid squad is rooting for you!"

Lew clenched her fists exultantly.



That night.

"Hey, Lefi, can you drink booze?"

I sat cross-legged across from her while she mumbled "Hm, hm, hm" to herself. The maids had already finished their work for the day and gone to their room, and Iluna and Shii were asleep, so Lefi and I were playing shogi in a corner of the room away from them. It had become a routine for the two of us to play some sort of board game every night before bed.

Speaking of, right now, I was playing with a rook-and-bishop handicap. The board was split exactly half in her favor and half in mine. Lefi used to need the rook-and-bishop handicap on top of the gold *and* silver generals, so all in all, she was definitely getting better.

"Hm? Yes, I can. Dragons have always been quite fond of spirits, you see. I am not much of a drinker myself, however, as I much prefer sweets."

"Ohhh, interesting."

"Indeed. There are fools among dragonkind who would attack cities to quench their thirst for alcohol, they love it so. Those impatient buffoons meet their ends quickly for precisely that attitude."

Wow. Even dragons can be asswipes like that, huh?

"Why the sudden question? I was under the impression you were not particularly fond of alcohol."

Lefi looked up from the board and at me, a puzzled expression on her face.

"Well, it's not like I *hate* it or anything, I just don't particularly *like* it either. That aside, I told you about how I saved the king when I was in the royal capital, right? As a reward, he gave me some expensive, high-quality wine. I thought it was really tasty, so I figured you'd wanna try some too."

"Oh ho. For *you* to praise it so highly must mean that it is quite delectable. I would very much like to have a taste, then. Pour for me, won't you?"

"Yes, ma'am. Comin' right up."

At her request, I pulled two glasses and a bottle of wine from

Inventory. I'd bought the glasses ahead of time specifically for this occasion. I tugged the cork out with a nice *pop*, and a full-bodied aroma drifted from the bottle to my nostrils.

"Hmm, what a lovely scent."

So said Lefi as I poured us both generous portions of the wine, the liquid sloshing around merrily.

"Be careful, okay? This wine goes down really smooth. Like, so smooth that it's hard *not* to wanna chug it. I wouldn't want the legendary Supreme Dragon to get wasted before I do, all right?"

"Is that a challenge you have proposed? We dragons are both powerful and lovers of drink. You truly think that I, the most powerful among them, would become inebriated before a peon such as you? I believe it far more likely that *you*, despite having made preparations in advance, will succumb, and quite easily at that."

I returned Lefi's bold smile with a cocky grin of my own.

"Wanna know something fun, Lefi? Anyone who thinks they're too strong to beat generally ends up losing *because* of their strength. They always end up getting the tables turned on them by their so-called inferiors."

"Such impudence! So be it, then. I accept your challenge. And I expect you to prove your mettle quite thoroughly given that you insist on running your mouth thusly."

"Mwa ha ha ha! Today's your lucky day, lady, because I'll show you what a demon lord is truly capable of!"

Lefi thrust her glass at me and I clinked it with my own.

Gee, it's almost like I knew this would happen.

"H-Hey, you okay there, Lefi?"

"Shilensh! Ah am fine!"

With rosy cheeks and drowsy eyes, Lefi knocked back the wine in her glass. Some of it spilled from the corners of her mouth, running down her neck to her chest. It was honestly kinda sexy. She was also slurring her words and her head was swaying back and forth, meaning she was three sheets to the wind.

Lefi was a total lightweight. Eh, on second thought, maybe that wasn't the best word for it considering that she *had* downed a shitload of it by this point. But the hero still had her beat in that department. At best, she could handle her liquor about as well as a regular person.

This woman, I swear to God... She talked so big about dragons being super heavy drinkers, yet here she was, already sloshed. I'd give her one thing, though, she never disappointed. For real.

I went to the kitchen, filled a glass with water, then went back and handed it to her.

"Here. Drink up."

“Ngh... Mpf... Ahhh!”

She took it from me and drained it in one big gulp. Then, she shoved the glass and the shogi board we were still in the middle of using aside before collapsing onto the floor, cushioning her head with my lap. My mistake for having sat back down across from her. *Guess she wants a pillow, huh?*

I could feel the warmth of her body even through her pajamas.

“What? You giving up?”

“Nitwit. The match has only just begun. This is merely a break.”

Lefi seemed to have sobered up a little thanks to the water. The fact that she could form coherent sentences was proof of that. We’d been repeating this cycle for a while now. She got drunk super fast, but she also sobered up almost as quickly. I figured it had to be a trait unique to the heavy-drinking dragonkind.

I smiled at how she was acting. Then, since I was in the perfect position, I placed my hand on her head and I tousled her beautiful, nearly transparent silver hair before caressing it with a gentle rhythm. *Damn, it feels good.* It was just as wonderful of a sensation as touching her wings.

“Hey, Lefi?”

“Hm?”

“You’ve been pushing yourself too hard lately.”

She harrumphed in response while staring up at me.

“N-No, I have not. Wh-Why bring this up so abruptly anyway?”

“I’ve known you for almost six months now. You think I didn’t notice right away?”

Hell, I was pretty sure *anyone* would have picked up on how weird she was being.

I kept talking as Lefi remained silent.

“You really don’t have to overdo it. I don’t know what Lew and Leila said to you, but I like you just the way you are. It’s fun to watch you mess around in your usual way, and it’s even more fun when we mess around together. You don’t have to be someone else; just be yourself.”

“I... I am not overworking myself.”

Shyly avoiding my gaze, she mumbled softly.

“I am well aware that my actions of late are not ones I am used to, but that does not mean I do not enjoy what I am doing or that I am straining myself. I am doing all that because I *wish* to. Such... Such as this. T-Touching you as I am doing gives the person I am now a great deal of comfort.”

Lefi’s face was beet red. She was clearly embarrassed.

How do I even respond to that?

Her normally snow-white skin was now beautifully flushed like a

fully ripened apple. At that moment, I found her so lovely, so mesmerizing that I couldn't look away. It was such an overwhelming feeling that it was almost like I was drowning in the essence of *her*. My heart started beating just a little bit faster.

"W-Well, then. Enough of your befuddled expression. The rest period is over, so I demand you open the next bottle at once."

Lifting her head from my thigh, she crawled back to sit in her original location opposite me.

"Y-Yeah, sure. W-Wait, you still wanna drink?"

I shook myself out of my accidental enchantment and tried to play it off with that question.

"Of course I do. Not to mention our show-gi match remains unfinished."

"All right, sure. As you wish, Your Highness. Hey. Hold up. You switched the board around! And you moved the pieces too?!"

"Hmph. Whatever do you mean? Did you *see* me move the pieces? Perchance you are just using that as a pretext for surrender?"

"Grr... Fine, we'll do it your way. This handicap works to my advantage. Now I can show you what I'm *really* capable of."

Her cheeks still pink, Lefi grinned like she'd already won. I growled in response while grabbing another bottle of booze from Inventory.

In the dead of night, that was how we passed the time until the wine had us both good and loaded.



"My lord, Lady Lefi, it's morning!"

"Nnh..."

With Lew shaking my shoulder, I gradually forced myself to wake up. I opened my eyes just a bit and saw her grinning like the werewolf that ate the canary.

"Morning, Lew."

"Gooooo morning, my lord! And thanks for such a sweet treat so early in the day! But I recommend you save the flirting for later, because the others are going to start showing up soon!"

"Huh?"

I stared up at her, totally confused. But when I finally noticed the weight on top of me, I redirected my stare down. The two main things I saw were gorgeous silver hair and magnificent horns. Through the shining strands I could see the pale, seductive curve of her nape, her slim collarbone, and, further down, a modest chest rising and falling as she breathed. I could feel the steady beat of her heart too.

I didn't know how or why, but I'd fallen asleep holding Lefi.

Huh?! Wait, wait, wait, what the hell is this? Simultaneously,

probably because she'd woken up too, Lefi started to move from on top of me. Her long-lashed eyelids slowly opened, revealing her huge, jewel-like eyes. Once they were all the way open, they looked straight into mine as I lay there unmoving.

“...”

“...”

We stared at each other, flabbergasted.

“Uh...morning.”

“Oh, um, hm... Yes, good morning.”

We both went silent again, still dumbfounded by what was going on.

“Well, then... Yuki, might you release me?”

“Huh? O-Oh, yeah, my bad.”

I unwrapped my arms from around her back. *Guess I did that while we were asleep.* Lefi took her sweet time rolling off me, then sat up next to me. Once she was off, I sat up too, shaking my head a few times to clear the early morning foggiess. Then, I did a situation check.

A buttload of wine bottles fenced us in. The way they were scattered everywhere, I could see traces of what had happened last night. Clearly, we'd drunk way, waaay too much, but my memories from before we passed out were vague. Maybe I'd pulled her in while we were sleeping because my unconscious mind was seeking some sort of warmth?

Continuing my scan of the room, it seemed like Lew was the only one awake right now. I didn't see Leila, so I figured she was still in her room. Iluna and her angelic sleeping face had yet to leave dreamland, and Shii was back in her slime form. I wasn't sure if she was asleep or awake, but she wasn't moving, which most likely meant she was also still snoozing away.

Also, I just now remembered that Lew was a habitual early riser.

“Oh, one more thing, you two. The smell of alcohol is kinda strong, so I suggest you both take baths. I'll clean up here in the meantime.”

“Y-Yeah...good idea. Thanks a bunch.”

Lew spoke while picking up the loads of empty wine bottles. Following her advice, I headed straight for the small bathroom I'd set up in the real throne room, deciding to forgo the hot spring in my inn for now. Yup, it was the same bathroom I'd created before building the inn area. I used it anytime I wanted to shower quickly instead of submerging myself in a full tub regimen.

“Ah, crap. Lefi, you wanna go in first?”

“Hm? Let us avail ourselves of the facility together. I see no reason to take turns.”

Her eyes still drowsy, Lefi looked up at me, mystified by my question. *Yeah, no, that one's totally on me.* I forgot that she wasn't particularly embarrassed by being seen in her birthday suit. She had no need to wear clothes when she was in her dragon form. Plus, apparently, the only reason she even wore clothes in her human form was because it was chilly when she was buck naked.

It was all very reasonable and inevitable when I thought about it, but from my point of view, she was too much of a temptress. Anytime she thought she could show herself off and get me all hot and bothered, the smug little vixen just wouldn't let up with her snide little comments. I did my darndest to keep a poker face whenever that happened, of course, but a man's got his limits, y'know?

Anyway, girding my loins for yet another such encounter, I went stone-faced and replied as nonchalantly as I could.

"All right, let's go in together, then."

"Excellent. You will wash my hair."

"Yeah, yeah. I am ever at your service, my lady."

Lew watched us walk toward the bathroom with a shameless grin on her face.

After our refreshing, cleansing shower, we headed back to the main room, where everyone else had already gathered. We all ate breakfast together, then each person headed off to do their own thing as per usual. Iluna and Shii went to the meadow to play, and Leila and Lew went to work on their daily chores. As far as Lefi, I figured our talk yesterday was at least a little effective because she decided to roll right back into her futon for some more shut-eye. She gave off "I'ma do me" vibes, and it ruled. If you asked me, Lefi was at her best when she was freewheeling like this.

While everyone was focused on their own activities, I headed to the castle via the special door, walked through the meadow, and from there, made my way outside the cave. Today, I planned on beefing up the dungeon. Now that I had some experience with human settlements, I definitely understood how powerful hero-class humans were. I had somehow managed to defeat that Adamantite-class battle maniac, but if I'd had to face two of him at once—or hell, even one person at a higher level—I would for sure have died. That was human potential for ya.

Then there were the other species: demons, therianthropes, demi-humans. They had even greater physical abilities than humans, so if I made enemies out of any of those folks, I could totally picture any one of them making quick work of beating me. And in this world, losing meant death.

Those were precisely the reasons why I needed to be proactive

and level myself up. But the only real way for me to reinforce my demon lord strength was by devoting myself to monster hunting. I wasn't in the mood for that just yet, so I decided to hold off for a bit and toughen up the dungeon's defenses instead.

In the event that hero-class enemies attacked the dungeon, I figured that my existing traps wouldn't be enough to stop them. At best, the traps might chip away at their health that they would have to chug potions to stay alive. If that happened, hopefully I'd have covered their bodies in enough wounds to keep them at two-thirds HP.

There was also the issue of monsters—or lack thereof—under my command. I had no one except Shii, Rir, and the wraith triplets, and Rir was the only one of them with any real combat ability to speak of. I wanted at least four more strong monsters as followers, and though it would obviously be a great bonus, they didn't *have* to be on Rir's level.

Oh, so, the reason I'd hit on four specifically—my thinking was that I needed to prioritize quality over quantity. I didn't see the point of having one or two hundred weak monsters as subordinates if they weren't gonna be a match for any enemies. Hell, even *I* could mow down that many monsters by myself without breaking a sweat. If I could do that with no formal battle training, others with similar stats would also be able to do it with little to no effort.

The only time strength in numbers actually worked was with stuff like that incident with the ants. There had to be so goddamn many that you couldn't even see the ground. Otherwise, a numbers game was a meaningless combat strategy. Not to mention that I wasn't exactly swimming in DP, so summoning a ton of monsters was out of the question for me. That said, I *did* think I was way better off than others in the DP department because of Lefi's existence.

On top of that, unlike certain socialist countries, I didn't have the resources to harvest soldiers from fields at the drop of a hat. I wouldn't be in such a bind if I did. Since I lacked the necessary alchemical talents to turn vegetables into armies, I needed to make do with what I *did* have.

Besides, in the end, this forest was an unforgiving place. You needed to meet a minimum power requirement to even survive here. If you didn't, you could kiss the very concept of life goodbye. Given all that, I'd made the executive decision to find myself fewer but stronger underlings.

Hold on, though. Didn't Rir have his own followers? *Eh, I'll just leave them to him.* As long as he had a leash on them, I figured they'd be fine on their own. No need for me to butt in.

Anyway, I had a specific vision in my mind for leveling up my dungeon. I wanted it to be the crazy, game-balance-disrupting kind

where a mini-boss appeared the minute you walked in. And even if you crushed that mini-boss, the next enemy you'd find would be another one.

On second thought, it wasn't like I *had* to make any intruders fight my bosses one-on-one. I could have *all* my boss monsters attack the intruders as soon as they entered. I wanted my enemies to hate it here so much that they'd scream "Fuck this game!" That was the kind of dungeon I was imagining.

Of course, I wouldn't just let it end there. Oh no, I saw myself installing all kinds of nasty traps in the boss room too. But the attackers wouldn't notice them until it was too late because they'd be so caught up in fighting the bosses. And then, those very traps would escort them to the land of the dead.

Whoaaa, baby, I'm pumped now. Nice. *Very* nice. I was having a blast just *thinking* about creating such an absurdly difficult area. On that note, it was time to work hard toward achieving my ultimate goal of making a dungeon so transcendently brutal that no intruders would ever come near it again. I wanted it so that if a hero-class enemy *did* attack, they would leave so traumatized they'd never come back. Security came first for my home sweet home, you see.

Speaking of, I needed to implement some actual, real safety measures too. I would unalive the shit out of myself if any of this hurt Iluna or the others. I'd also told Nell that she could come hang out anytime, so I couldn't risk accidentally injuring her either. I had to make it so that the dungeon's defense system wouldn't activate against anyone I considered an ally.

I was in high spirits now that I had a solid direction for my planning. So, while scrolling incessantly through the menu, I racked my brain to come up with all kinds of ideas to strengthen the dungeon.



"Hmm... That should do it for the traps."

For my first trap, I had an explosive hidden under a bunch of stones that would go off when someone stepped on it. My second was a pointy, toxic, three-sixty trap where if you entered a designated zone, poison-coated blades shot out from all sides.

A third trap involved taking advantage of the dungeon's location in the Demonic Forest. A secret buzzer would screech when it was activated, immediately luring in all the nearby monsters. Naturally, this wouldn't work in a normal dungeon. Despite being pretty cheap in the DP Catalog, my guess was that this particular trap would be crazy effective, so I'd set up a bunch in various spots throughout the dungeon's territory. That's what I call good ROI.

Two other traps involved flora. One type focused on a plant that used mimicry to disguise itself as a normal plant, its true function only being revealed when a creature passed close by. When that happened, the plant would activate all its nearby brethren, turning them into spikes that impaled anything in the vicinity. The second one was a flower-type. It gave off a pheromone so faint that no abilities would react to its presence, but that was powerful enough to knock any living thing unconscious.

Besides those, I'd positioned all kinds of other traps everywhere. There were big ones and small ones, each having its own special effect. Just like my very own minefield. These traps, which utilized the dungeon's powers, were thankfully displayed on Maps. Without this vital feature, I would absolutely forget what I set up where.

Let me describe the general layout of the swarm of traps I'd put in place. It covered the area from the farthest reaches of the dungeon's territory to just before the cave entrance. The density of traps was thickest on the outer edges of my domain, becoming more sporadic closer to the tunnel. Following that same directional pattern, the traps' natures gradually transformed from physical to concealed types. Basically, if someone let their guard down once they hit that invisible change line, ka-freaking-boom, it was the end of the line for them.

For all my talk about them, though, those interior traps were gonna be kept inactive. They were so insanely lethal that they were liable to kill someone even if that person didn't need to be killed. There was also the bigger issue of how once the traps were set off and thus broken, it would cost more DP than I'd like to reinstall them. If they got sprung by small fry, it'd be a colossal waste.

That was why I'd decided that I would manually activate those ones, and I'd only do it after verifying an intruder's strength. To help with that, I'd updated Maps to open itself automatically whenever an enemy above a certain DP threshold showed up, like when that army had tried to storm my territory or the time Nell had come a-callin'. With that, all my safety protocols were in place.

"Only thing left now is a new combat asset. Dang, not enough DP, huh?"

Mind you, I wasn't broke or anything, I was just a little shy of being able to summon all the monsters I wanted all at once. I *could* just buy them one at a time as I saved up DP, but I was itching to summon my four newbies at the same time. Why? 'Cause I wanted them to be their own little cohorts. If I called up two of them now, odds were good that a lot more time would pass before I could summon the remaining two. Instead, I decided to save up a little more and summon them all at once.

When I'd had the dungeon absorb the treasure I'd looted from that

gang of thieves, I'd been pleasantly surprised at the DP conversion. It had ended up being way more than I'd expected it to be, which made me wonder how I was so low on DP now. *Shit, dude. Did I really burn through that much of it?*

Whatever. No biggie. Sooner or later, I would have it all back anyway. It was only a matter of time before I could execute my plan.

In the meantime, this was a perfect opportunity to test one of the traps.

"Rir."

"Grr."

Though Maps showed our family's beloved, reliable pet's location as being pretty far from mine, I immediately heard his rumble in my mind in response to my call. This was Remote Communication, one of the dungeon's abilities. It only worked with monsters under my command, but it let me communicate with them from far away. It was what I used whenever I called for Rir.

"I need your help, bud."

"Rir! Over there!"

"Grrr!"

He reacted immediately to my voice and broke into a sprint. That speed had us flying over the location I'd pointed out, and once he landed, he turned around so we could see our target. What were we looking at, you ask? A stupidly huge turtle, roaring like a friggin' kaiju while it knocked down trees left and right.

It was called a "Grand Tortoise." The monster's attack power itself wasn't that high, but its exterior was ridiculously hard on account of it being, well, a turtle. Even my best, sharpest weapon, Zaien, couldn't cut through it. The head and legs poking out of its shell were the only things a blade *could* slice.

Problem was, whenever it sensed danger, the damn thing would hide inside that hard-ass shell. It wouldn't move at all until the threat was gone, so I needed to find an opening and cut its freaking head off in one shot. There was no other way to defeat the thing.

Fortunately, ever since I'd perfected my aerial skills after gaining my second pair of wings, I could totally just dive-bomb it and lop off its head. With my current abilities, it was doable as a one-man job. Even Rir could easily bite its head off by making full use of his incredible speed.

Those were all reasons why I'd chosen this monster as my guinea pig. As strong as its defense was, Grand Tortoises were actually relatively easy to take down if you wanted to. It was the perfect specimen to test against a trap, so I'd baited one out from its dwelling. Would you like to know how? I'd caught it by surprise by stealing one

of its ginormous eggs from right in front of its eyes. Easy. I didn't know if the egg was edible, but I planned on handing it over to Leila for analysis.

Pissed off because of what I'd done, the massive turtle stomped after us—conveniently passing through one of my traps. Instantly, I heard the sound of a small explosion. At the same time, hundreds of blades burst out of the ground, scattering up into the air. Several of them plunged straight into the tortoise's limbs with a nasty *squelch*, but the damned reptile was so hellbent on chasing us that it paid no attention to the blades piercing its flesh at first. But then, it suddenly collapsed as if it had lost its strength. The turtle's fall kicked up a massive cloud of dust, and the thing finally stopped moving entirely. I was dead certain it had no clue what had just happened.

Analysis showed me that it still had HP left, so my guess was that it was just in a coma or something.

“Hoo boy, that makes me *real* happy.”

Deeply satisfied with the results, I spoke while the flying blades bounced harmlessly off the large water shield I'd created around us using my elemental magic. Exactly what I'd expected from a trap that had cost me so much DP. The poison had worked its way through the giant in a very short amount of time, which meant it would be more than effective against humanoid creatures too. I wasn't sure how this trap would stack up against abilities like Restorative Magic, but there definitely wasn't enough time for a person to use a potion before they lost consciousness, so that was cool.

I jumped down from Rir's back and cut off the tortoise's head. Once I converted its corpse to DP, I spoke to Rir.

“Be careful, okay, Rir? I won't activate the traps unless enemies show up, and I know you can see them anyway since you're a dungeon summon, but if you accidentally step on one while it's active, you'll still get caught in it, so watch out.”

Rir answered with a nod of his head that seemed to say, “I'll be careful.”

“Oh, yeah, one more thing. I'm planning on doing a few summons eventually, and when I do, I'd love it if you could show the newbies the ropes. Since, you know, you've got the hang of things around here.”

“Grr?”

He made a questioning growl.

“Yup, you heard right. I want you to train them so well that they won't get beaten by any random monsters when the time comes to fight. Please and thank you.”

“Grr.”

Content with our family pet's dependable reply, I patted the scruff

of his neck.

“All righty, I’m thinkin’ we spend the rest of today hunting monsters? Whaddya say, pal? You left me in the dust ages ago, so I seriously need to catch up to you on levels!”

“Grr?”

“Yeah, that’s right, the adventurer I told you about on our way back from the royal capital. Apparently, there’re plenty of tough guys around. I’ve got a feeling more enemies are gonna come out of the woodwork, so I figure now’s a good time to prepare. Just in case, y’know?”



With sickle-like limbs on both sides of its body and a hard exoskeleton, the station wagon-sized monster in front of me looked a lot like a praying mantis. Dancing left and right, I dodged what attacks I could. For the ones I couldn’t, I deflected them with Zaien using fencing techniques I’d learned from the Adamantite-class adventurer I’d fought in the capital. I’d ingrained his movements into my skull during our battle. My moves were still pretty shoddy, but I was somehow managing to deal with the mantis. Knowing that I would take a massive amount of damage if it hit me definitely helped me stay on my feet. Gotta say, that fight with the battle maniac had taught me a lot. *Sure don’t plan on going through that again, though.*

Once I’d gotten the hang of repelling its slashes, I decided it was my turn to take a few swings. Just as I was about to do that, though, the big, stupid bug flapped its wings and flew off, avoiding my counterattack. No worries, mate. Because my plan this whole time had been to force it into an evasive maneuver.

“Rir!”

Shouting his name was kinda unnecessary since Rir understood my intention immediately. He used his special ability, Super Speed, to cover the distance between himself and the mantis monster in the blink of an eye. Letting that momentum carry him forward, he lashed out at the thing with one of his forelegs.

“Giiigwiiiiii!”

The mantis let out a screech that made my ears bleed as Rir’s razor-sharp claws sliced off two of the sickle-limbs on its right side, spraying its bodily fluids everywhere. The color of those fluids was indescribable, and I didn’t want to even *think* about how or why it got to be that way.

I rushed toward it while it was distracted by Rir. Lifting Zaien up high, I got ready to deal the killing blow, but the monster’s countless, tiny compound eyes caught sight of me anyway. Aware of my presence as a threat to its existence, the godforsaken insect tried to

activate some sort of magic to intercept my impending strike. Too bad for it that it failed.

Sorry, Buggy, but I can see the flow of your magic. Also, I'd disrupted the pest's magic with Dispel Magic. Aiming for the joint around its neck where its shell was the thinnest, I pierced through that spot with Zaïen. Now that I'd separated its head from the rest of its body, the useless mantis had no choice but to wriggle and squirm in that death throes peculiar to bugs. And then, it finally stopped moving.

"Phew. Nice work, Rir."

Resting Zaïen on my shoulder, I made quick work of converting the mantis monster's remains to DP. There was no way I was tossing any of its parts into Inventory as ingredients; I had less than zero interest in eating bugs of any sort. I casually glanced over at Rir, who was relaxing on the ground next to me as the DP conversion process wrapped up.

Hmm, that was almost too easy. It was the only thought that popped into my head. The monster's total stats beat mine by close to 150. Magic and Dexterity were the only two of mine that were higher, but even then, I'd won easily. I'd barely even broken a sweat. This was just more proof of Rir's outrageous power. Having him by my side reassured me so much that I could fight enemies stronger than me without a care in the world. Plus, him being with me gave me more offensive options during battle.

On top of that, Rir had a way higher aptitude for combat than I did. Without any input or instructions from me, he would figure out the best solution for any given situation and handle it accordingly. For example, anytime I screwed up an attack or missed my chance to KO something, Rir would immediately activate his Morphing Chains special ability and come to my rescue. Thanks to him saving my ass countless times, I had yet to be on the receiving end of serious damage.

There were times where I knew that my own blows wouldn't be enough to kill something. When that happened, he had no trouble changing tactics. Instead of targeting a monster's vitals, he would help by ripping their limbs off or finding some other way to immobilize them. That way, my next attack would get the job done.

I seriously had it easy thanks to him. The mantis monster we just took down was a particularly dangerous one that inhabited the western region of the Demonic Forest, yet dead it now lay. I couldn't deny that it was one of the weaker ones from that fearsome group, but it didn't matter. Monsters in other areas were definitely no match for the Yuki and Rir combo. Made me wonder how much less brutal my fight with the Adamantite-class adventurer would have been if Rir'd been there.

That said, I'd recently discovered an interesting fact about the aforementioned western region: it also happened to be the most monster-heavy part of the Demonic Forest. Aside from the north being part of Lefi's former territory, it seemed that a lot of monsters had migrated to the west for unavoidable reasons such as losing the battle for survival or being unable to find food in their former habitats. In other words, the western part of the Demonic Forest was the place's main hub. All the other regions were just surplus.

As long as I lived in the Demonic Forest, there was no point acting like the general of the mountain if that mountain was full of weak monsters. And while there was meaning in gaining fight experience, the current crop of monsters just wasn't quite up to snuff with Rir tagging along. On the other hand, though, fighting them without Rir was a bit much to ask of myself considering that I wasn't anywhere close to being a professional fighter.

Real talk? Just the *thought* of fighting without him scared me. If I ventured even further into the western region, I knew that I would find a hellscape of a monster menagerie waiting for me. A location teeming with the worst of the worst, so much so that a single glance would have me saying, "Oh, shit. I'm fucked."

From here, I could see an absolute tower of a dinosaur-looking thing deep in that section. My best estimate of its height was a seven-story apartment building. How in the actual fudge was I supposed to beat a monster like that? *Please, someone enlighten me. I'm all ears.* Its neck was so goddamn thick that I bet even Zaien couldn't sever its head.

I just had an idea. Could I incorporate another sorcerous circuit into Zaien that would lengthen its blade? Or something like having a hollow blade zoom out from its tip? If I could modify Zaien like that, it could probably hack off the dinosaur's head. Although I still didn't know if my blade could even make a dent in the thing in the first place. But wait. If I added another offensive-type circuit into Zaien, would that interfere with Crimson Flame? Or would pouring my magic into my greatsword trigger both circuits simultaneously? *Okay, now I'm curious about how this all works.* I'd never tried something like it, so I had no idea what the end result would be. I'd put it on the agenda for later.

While I was turning all of that over in my head, Scout, which I had on twenty-four seven, warned me that an enemy was approaching.

"Grrrr..."

At the same time, Rir apparently caught its scent too. He picked himself up from his prone position, focused his attention in the enemy's direction, and let out a low, deep growl. Next to him, I took

up a stance, ready to fuck shit up with Zaien at a moment's notice. Then, we waited.

After what felt like an eternity, a beast roughly Rir's size revealed itself. It plodded heavily from deep within the woods. Sturdy fangs that looked like they could crush boulders stuck out of its mouth. Blade-sharp claws sprouted from the paws attached to its huge, muscular limbs. Unfurling from its torso was a grotesque pair of gray wings that looked like they were made of hundreds of bones fused together. And lastly, it had a forked tail with a hideous point like a scorpion's.

It peered at us with its snakelike eyes—and sneered ferociously, like it had just found a new toy to play with.

Race: Manticore

Class: Sadistic Beast

Level: 96

Ah, shit. I shouldn't have complained about the monsters around here being too weak, because lo and behold, a strong one just *had* to show up. *This is karma, isn't it?*



This was bad. The difference in our stats was so vast that despite Analysis's high level, all I could see were the monster's race, class, and level. And what a freaking class it was. Sadistic Beast. It sounded insanely dangerous, but combined with its level at 96? Threat level very, *very* high. Excluding Lefi, its stats were the highest I'd ever seen.

Damn it, I screwed the pooch so hard... The monster had come from an area that was just barely outside the dungeon's territory, so I hadn't noticed it until it was too late. I wanted to throw it a "Ciao" and bolt like lightning, but it didn't seem like it would let me escape. Its gaze told me that it already considered us its prey, while its expression was completely relaxed. The savage grin on its face clearly showed its sadistic desire to find different ways to torment us.

I had no doubt that even if I tried to run away by jumping on Rir, it would chase us to the ends of the world. If a fight was the only way out of here, so be it. The taunting expression on its face pissed me right the hell off. *I'ma peel this fucker's skin off and turn it into a carpet for our foyer.*

Rir attacked first. He figured out immediately that I planned on fighting, so as soon as he saw me prepare to strike, he activated Morphing Chains. My boy made chains spring up from the ground beneath the enemy's feet in an attempt to restrain it. But the fiendish piece of shit detected Rir's chains and leaped forward in a flash. *It*

wants to ram us!

Instantly, Rir and I moved in opposite directions, evading the monster's charge. Its frighteningly fast stomping attack missed us and slammed into the ground violently, creating a massive crater. Soil flew into the air, creating a spectacular earthen shower. *Hooooly moly...* If I'd taken a direct hit from that, I would've been reincarnated as ground meat.

Having successfully dodged, Rir took up another stance and tried to stab the monster from the side with his claws. But the scum-sucking freak sidestepped Rir's attack with a super-casual, almost lazy jump away. In that brief span of time, I managed to rush behind it to its blind spot. I swung Zaien down, intending to drive my greatsword through it, but one of its forked, scorpion-like tails blocked my attack. It wiggled like it was alive.

A screeching, clanging sound, almost like metal grinding on metal, echoed as the tail stopped Zaien in its tracks. The recoil punched right through my arms. For a moment, my body stiffened from the shock of the impact because the sensation had been like trying to cut through metal. My brief immobility presented the perfect opportunity for the other tail to aim right for my heart and finish me. It raced straight toward me.

"Tch!"

As if I'd let ya! I jumped back just in time. I had no plans to let this beast reign supreme over me, so I started working my magic during my dodge. When I landed safely, I blasted it with the water dragon magic that I was most familiar with, the one I could produce the fastest. This time, I created several of them. They soared through the air like arrows reaching their monstrous target—but in the very next moment, a barrier like an AT field sprung up around the fiend, thwarting my magic.

What the...? Are you freaking kidding me?! This is bullshit?! As I stood there with a gobsmacked expression on my face, the horrific son of a bitch decided it was time to retaliate. Using its tremendous speed, it barreled my way again, ready to smack the life out of me with its signature front-leg attack. By the skin of my teeth, I succeeded in shoving Zaien between us to defend myself, but I couldn't hold out against its power, so I flew backward when my strength gave out.

"Hngh!"

The momentum had me knocking down a huge tree before crashing into another one, which finally stopped me. Pain rushed through my whole body. *I feel like I'm gonna pass out.* Sheer willpower was the only thing helping me endure this agony. With tears blurring my vision, I struggled to open Inventory. I dragged out a bottle of Super Potion and downed it in a single gulp.

“Haah...”

Zombie warfare for the win. In a matter of seconds, my pain started to disappear. While the potion did its thing, I looked downward to check on Zaien. It was fine, thank Satan. I only managed a quick glance, but there wasn't even a nick in its blade. *Hell to the yes, Quality: Indeterminable. That's what I'm talkin' about.*

Somewhat recovered and feeling a little more alive once more, I directed my gaze straight ahead to take stock of our situation. I guess my timing was good, because right then, I saw Rir blast his own magic at the monster. Just when I made out a bright light of some sort flashing above the thing's head, everything instantly turned blindingly white.

An ear-splitting roar rocked the surroundings. A second later, a cloud of dust obscured my view even though I had been able to see again since the light had dissipated. I was almost back in fighting form.

That was Rir's lightning magic, huh? I bet he didn't use that attack until now because he was afraid I might get caught up in it too. If it had been a normal monster, that one blast would have instantly kick-started the enemy's journey to the other world. Too bad luck wasn't on our side, because though the ground around the varmint was gouged out, making it look like a disaster site, the thing itself stood square in the middle of that hollow, completely unscathed.

Once the dirt cloud cleared, so did my field of vision. Scanning the area around the beast, I saw the pseudo-AT field back up around it. With Rir's attack over, though, it steadily disappeared, seemingly melting into the air. The vile monstrosity's mocking smirk made its face extremely punchable. Then, it tried to provoke Rir by twisting its neck side to side all cocky-like. It was giving off “Didja do something?” vibes. *Bah. What a ridiculous defense.* It was absolutely, positively screwing with us.

It drove me batshit crazy that it could withstand Rir's magic without a single scratch. I wanted to curse it until I was both blue in the face and out of words to use, but then I realized that there was no way its defenses could be a hundred percent perfect. Thinking back on our encounters so far, anytime Rir attacked with his claws or fangs and I used Zaien, it had either dodged or protected itself with its own body. It hadn't created the quasi-AT field in those instances. I couldn't be overly confident about my theory, but was it possible that the barrier was only for magic attacks?

Even now, the battle between Rir and the evil giant was ongoing. The enemy either avoided my pet's claws and bites entirely or used its double tail to defend itself. Rir would use his magic between physical bouts when he could, and the monster blocked those attacks each time

with its fake AT field.

Hm... It's worth a shot. The brute was still oozing that irritating unconcerned attitude, as if it had all the time in the world to fight one demon lord and his beastly ally. I hated to admit it, but that was probably true, because if we kept at it, at this rate, *we* would be the ones to end up in a bad place. In that case, it was totally acceptable to use a power other than our own.

This match was no different from the ones I'd had with that Adamantite-class adventurer and the gross Undead giant in the royal capital. Since my current opponent had me beat in terms of strength, skills, *and* magic, I would just have to find other ways to win.

"Rir, we're making a strategic retreat! To the place where we were!"

Rir paused for a few moments at my shout, digesting my words. It didn't take him long to figure out what I was planning, so he ran over to me. With my impeccable timing, I hopped onto his back and off we zoomed to our previous destination.

Seeing us race off, the insufferable swine narrowed its eyes like a cat about to torture a mouse, before it began its pursuit of us.

"Grr...!"

I rode facing backward on top of Rir. The monstrous bastard threw itself at us over and over again, using massive trees it had torn down as launching pads, but I blocked its attacks with Zaien. Both of my arms shook, practically groaning from the weight of its blows.

"Ngh! You need to take it down a notch or twelve, asshole!"

Using all my might, I whacked at it with Zaien. The cum guzzler evaded by springing back, then created lance-like projectiles out of soil and shot them at us.

"Goddammit!"

If a single one hit Rir as he literally carried our escape, it would be an instant checkmate against him and me. Once more, I forced my tired arms to wield Zaien and repel all the dirt spears. In exchange, though, I couldn't ward off the darts heading my way, so a few of them stabbed through me.

"Arghhhh! Balls in my mouth!"

Blood spilled from my body, splashing on Rir.

"Grr?!"

"Don't baby me! Just shut up, keep your eyes on the road, and don't stop running!"

As he skillfully avoided the forest's many obstacles on our frantic flight, Rir still found the time to worry about me. Instead, I scolded him for his concern and made him keep going. I wanted to use a potion, but I had no leeway to. I couldn't afford to slack off when it

came to our defense, because the monster chasing us relentlessly would use any opening it could to finish us off.

It's fine. I'm fine. My demon lord body wasn't gonna throw in the towel so easily. I pulled out only the spears that might impede my movements, leaving the others alone, and went back to intercepting the fucker's attacks. It stayed hot on our heels, grinning maniacally at seeing its darts find their marks in my body. *You son of a bitch...*

We would reach our destination in just a few more minutes. Before we did, though, I wanted just one chance to wipe the smirk off its fugly mug. I would show it what happened to dumbasses who underestimated a demon lord's power. My rage and frustration had built up to nuclear levels since I'd been unable to do anything except endure its barrage of attacks, but now, I pulled out my fully charged magic pistol from my lower back.

I clamped Zaien between my teeth. Though its heft hurt my jaws, I needed a free hand to root around in Inventory with, and the one was holding my pistol. I started dragging out weapons at random. They were all failures from my Weapon Enhancement experiments. Then, I started hurling them at the savage fiend. With every throw, more blood spurted from my lance wounds. *Whatever. That's future me's problem.* The important thing now was to make that bag of donkey dicks cry.

It nimbly avoided my wannabe missiles by swinging itself onto the giant trees nearby like a monkey. That was exactly what I wanted it to do, though. Sighting its next target tree's base with my magic pistol, I pulled the trigger. It was a 3,000-MP shot, so it made a massive explosion like several cannons firing at once. Within seconds, I heard the cracking sound of a tree about to fall.

Fantastic. My magic bullet blasted the tree trunk to smithereens. Having lost its landing spot so abruptly, the skid mark of a monster flailed in midair with a shocked look on its stupid face. Then, losing its battle against gravity, it tumbled to the ground dramatically, kicking up dirt everywhere.

"Ha! That's what you get!"

I shoved the magic pistol back into the waistband of my pants. With an outrageous, shit-eating grin on my face, I thrust the hand not holding Zaien into the air and gave it the most glorious middle finger of all time.

"Gooowaaaaahhh!"

Seemed the big genius had figured out that I was insulting it, if its infuriated roar was any indication. Now that I had fully riled it up, it intensified the power of its attacks.

"Bring it on, ya troll! I'm lovin' your face right now! Let me take a picture so it'll last longer! Come on, what's good?! You were takin' it

real easy before!”

“Grrr!”

“Sorry, Rir! I genuinely believe in being a pacifist, but if somebody’s dumb enough to pick a fight with me, I’m a take up the gauntlet and give it back to ’em a hundred times over. See, I also genuinely believe in not being a baby back bitch! A man can follow two doctrines in life!”

Rir’s grumble had been to tell me not to instigate the enemy, but I laughed maniacally while I made my little speech. Maybe my crazed behavior stemmed from too much blood loss? In any case, I felt like I was reaching the end of my rope in a few ways. No big deal, though, because I’d accepted the challenge to protect my hard-won peace and tranquility. *It is what it is.*

The beast looked like it was boiling with rage, and that definitely made *me* feel refreshed. Witnessing my gleeful expression, it chased after us even more ferociously. *Ladies and gents, fasten your seat belts as we make our final approach.* We had arrived at our destination: one of the traps I’d set earlier.

My and Rir’s magic abilities—for example, my water dragons and his lightning—were composed of magical energy. Essentially, they were magical reproductions of natural phenomena. But the traps I’d installed throughout my dungeon’s territory were another story entirely.

I had bought the traps with that mysterious object known as DP. Though I could make them appear like magic wherever and whenever I wanted, items bought with DP behaved differently. Magic and anything created from it disappeared once the magical energy ran out, whereas things purchased with DP remained as matter in this world.

The whole concept was still such an enigma that I could ask questions forever and never fully understand, but in short, any trap I had spent DP on existed as a purely physical entity, not a magical one. Well, I did have magical-type traps too, but we weren’t heading to one of those.

Based on our battle so far, I guessed that its mock AT field was the type that activated automatically. I didn’t know how to explain it, but anytime it defended against Rir’s or my magic, I noticed with my Demon Eyes that the field would appear spontaneously, as if the monster’s magic was working without its control.

Normally, the way magic worked was through the user’s will. It would manifest when the user deliberately called for their magical energy. For example, let’s say I wanted magic to come out of my right hand. I would have to direct the magic running throughout my body to exit through my right palm. That was the process for manifesting magic.

But the manticore's not-AT field didn't work like that. Going back to my example just now, it would be like if the magic already in my right hand activated on its own. I noticed that the monster's intention wasn't involved at all whenever the field generated, which was why I came to the conclusion it was an automated type of magical barrier.

What's more, despite possessing a protective ability like that, it always used its own body to defend itself against physical attacks like a swing of Zaien. As far as I was concerned, that was more proof that I was right about the field being for magic-only attacks. In that case, the purely physical trap we were headed toward would definitely be effective.

The only problem now was timing it. If I activated the dormant trap too early, there was a possibility that it would notice and evade. On the flip side, if I was too slow, the monster would just pass through the trap without ever being affected by it. *A moment decides a battle, eh?*

Although the scenery hadn't changed much during our mad dash, we were just a few hundred meters from our destination. I could see it with my own eyes.

"Hey, dipshit, why're you lookin' so desperate, huh?! Lemme see that pretty smile of yours, the one you had on when you were feeling like you had this in the bag! But wait! Don't tell me you've lost your nerve after I started making you dance in the palm of my hand! I guess no one likes being led around by their nose, especially when someone inferior is doing the leading!"

"Grrraaawwwwwrrrrr!!!"

It charged after us, roaring in fury, but we dodged like it was nothing. I waited for our enemy to lose its composure even more—a process I was naturally speeding up by continuing to heckle it, guided solely by the wild impulses bubbling within my heart.

I need to get the timing right.

Rir galloped like a madman, kicking off the ground hard as he skillfully weaved between trees. The angered creature pounced, its jaws snapping violently at me. I twisted my body away from its toothy grasp, then punched it right in its stupid face. I felt the sensation of flesh make its way through my skin.

Not yet. Noooot yet.

For an instant, a fraction of a second, our enemy faltered. In that insanely small period of time, Rir crossed over where the trap was set, and that space stretched between us and it. The manticore recovered quickly from its moment of hesitation. Its face twisted into its most grotesque deviation yet, it glared at us and prepared to launch itself toward us.

Now!

In the milliseconds before the creature passed the checkpoint, I activated the trap. Its attention wasn't focused at all on its legs, so it unthinkingly stepped on the trap, immediately setting off an intense sound and a storm of light. A roaring flame exploded upward, bathing the surrounding area in a dark, dark red.

The explosion was so powerful that it would have killed any normal living thing right away. But I didn't have time to stand around and wait for the blast to clear because the mofo was level freaking 96. Even if it had taken a good deal of damage from the trap, it was extremely likely that it would be back on its feet given just a small amount of time. If I wanted to end this, now was my only chance.

Determination in my heart, I jumped off Rir's back. Holding Zaien with both hands, I wielded it so that it protected only my face. Then, I ran into the center of the blast. An unbearable inferno assaulted my whole body. I could feel various parts of me being both singed by the flames and pelted by the rocks I'd mixed in that were still flying everywhere. No problem, though. It hurt so bad that I wanted to die, but that was all it was—just pain. My body could still keep going.

“Hyaaah!”

I did my best to sustain myself against the tremendous air pressure. Pushing as much power as possible into my legs, I kicked off the ground with a battle cry and rushed straight through the explosion. There, I learned that my gamble had paid off.

The blast had damaged the manticore beyond my wildest expectations. Huge chunks of its body were blackened like charcoal, and I could see the whites of its eyes as its consciousness slipped away. If this hadn't worked, I'd planned on graciously extending the thing an invitation to enjoy the full course of traps laid out in the forest. I'd been ready to engage in a drawn-out battle, chipping away at it a little at a time, but it seemed luck was on my side after all, because that trap had done its job even better than I'd anticipated.

Its imitation AT field wasn't active. Now within a hair's breadth of the monster, I swung Zaien down diagonally from the right—when its eyes rolled back. Conscious once more, it sighted me. The moment it did, my Danger Detection ability warned me of a massive hazard. Time seemed to slow down, where a second felt like hours. In that surreal reality, I saw the goddamn beast rear up and raise one of its front legs, clearly intending to split my skull wide open with a stomp.

But I didn't stop. I didn't try to defend myself either. Because I wasn't alone here.

“Grrrr!”

Sporting burns across his body just like me, Rir raced to my side and sank his lethally sharp fangs into our opponent's shoulder. Its charge stopped right then and there. Meanwhile, Zaien continued on

its killing trajectory. The blade obeyed my will, heading straight toward the monster's neck. One slice. The sensation of bone and flesh being cut. Blood rained all around us as its head flew away, spinning wildly. Decapitated, the manticore twitched for a while as it bled out, before finally, slowly collapsing. Then, it stopped moving forever.

"And *stay* dead, asshole."



"Whew... That was rough."

I wheezed while converting the goddamn manticore's carcass into DP. Those words were all I could muster the energy for. *God, I hate fights like that.* They were exhausting as all hell.

"Cripes... If assface wanted to fight that bad, it should've started shit with a monster that was *way* more hostile. Right, Rir?"

"..."

"Hey, now, what's with the look? You callin' me hostile?"

"..."

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry. Forgive me, will ya? I got way too hyped toward the end there, so cut me some slack. Please? H-Here, let me fix the singed bits of your pelt."

Rir apparently had some, uh, *thoughts* about me having provoked the monster into stepping up its attacks during the crazy chase. My response was an attempt to smooth things over as our beloved family pet gave me the side-eye. I took out a potion from Inventory and started pouring it over the parts of his fur that had been burned by the explosion.



As far as our more serious injuries went, I'd already healed 'em all. I'd cursed that hellish monster more times than I could count as I'd used a knife to dig out the dirt spears it'd hurled my way and the stones that had stabbed into me because of the trap. Every gouge had hurt like a bitch and a half. *Rot in hell.* Never mind that I had already padded my DP wallet with its remains.

I would hold a grudge against manticores for eternity. Once I maxed out my level and could kill the fart suckers with one hand tied behind my back, I would go out of my way to hunt them to extinction. I was gonna wipe the whole manticore race off the face of this world.

Unrelated, getting my ass so thoroughly kicked led to me finding out some slightly unfortunate news about potions. Though they were phenomenal when it came to healing wounds, that phenomenal-ness didn't carry over into fixing blood loss. Rir was all right for the most part, but I'd lost so much blood that his back was completely red. It still had me kinda dizzy, truth be told.

When we get back, I'll ask Leila to make me food that'll rejuvenate both my body and my spirit. Meat. Definitely meat. We'd have a festival of meat.

Now that Rir's beautiful fur was back to its original fluffy state, I buried my face in it. *The perfect pillow.* Then I spoke to him.

"Okay. Let's go home."

"I'm baaack."

"Welco— Hm? Why are your garments so tattered? And is this odor I perceive that of something burnt?"

When I entered the real throne room, only Lefi was there. Iluna and Shii were probably still playing in the meadow while the maids were busy with the chores.

"Yeah, some bitch-ass manticore wouldn't leave us the hell alone."

I grabbed a change of clothes from the dresser on one side of the room as I talked to her. I tugged off the ones I was wearing, tossed them aside, and changed into the new set. The ones I'd changed out of were so torn up that I wouldn't be able to wear them again even if I wanted to, so I threw them in the garbage. Then, I walked farther into the room, plopped my ass down on the throne cross-legged, and slumped back with a long exhale.

"Haaaaaah... God, I'm tired."

But hot damn does this chair always make me feel good. It never failed to warm the cockles of my heart. The others said they didn't get that feeling when they sat in it, which made me think that this particular effect was reserved for the demon lord and the demon lord alone.

“Oh, is that right? You truly battled against such a persistent, rotten creature that enjoys torturing its prey? However, if I recall correctly, they do not utilize fire.”

“Nah, the smoky smell is 'cause of me. I killed it after catching it in an exploding dungeon trap, but I got caught in the blast too, hence why I look and smell like this. Rir's fur was a mess too. Remember that time Lew burned the spaghetti? He looked a lot like that.”

“Heh heh. I see. You dealt with quite the catastrophe, then.”

Hearing Lefi laugh made me smile. She seemed entertained by my story. While we chatted, I opened up Inventory and pulled Zaien out for an inspection since I'd gone hard in the paint with it. As long as it wasn't warped or chipped, I figured it'd be fine, but I just wanted to be sure. *Maybe I should take it to a settlement or something if it needs repairs.* With those thoughts running through my head, I looked it over. In the process, I couldn't help tilting my head in confusion. Something was off about my sword.

“Huh? Zaien, did you change?”

I got the strange feeling that it was somehow a deeper shade of crimson than it used to be. The blade was in perfect condition too—there were no dents or nicks in it—but it seemed even sharper than before. When I mentally asked my greatsword if it wanted to test its edge on something later, it responded with, “You mean it?” *Hold the fuck up.*

“You... Have you always been able to communicate this clearly?”

Up until now, it had only expressed itself vaguely through strong emotions like happiness, anger, and loathing. But this time, it “spoke” to me the same way Rir and Shii in her slime form did, with that unique telepathy thing where they didn't actually need to talk to chat. Just words in our minds.

And now, it replied to my latest question with an “I'm doing what I always do” instead of the emotions I usually got. *Sure, but even if you are, this is definitely new to me.*

I just remembered something. When I first used Analysis on Zaien, there was something in the description about “develops ever further.” This had to be evidence of its growth. Although I had to admit that the way it grew was definitely unexpected.

“Yuki. I am well aware that your weapon possesses a will of its own, but if you insist on conversing with it, I strongly recommend you do so when others are not around. Watching you speak to it like this only makes you appear suspicious. It is extremely eerie to me.”

“Oh, uh...yeah, that tracks. All right, let's circle back later, Zaien.”

Just as I was about to pop it back into Inventory, it sent me a message through my hand on its hilt. “Just a bit... I want to be together just a bit longer.” It sounded lonely to me.

“I-I’ll take you back out in a jiff. Promise.”

“Mm...understood.” Along with that intangible message, I got the impression of a child who was on the verge of tears but toughing it out anyway.

I stayed quiet, struggling to wrap my head around the situation. Since my beloved greatsword didn’t have a scabbard, it would have been dangerous to leave it lying around in all its sharp, bladed glory, so I did my best to calm it down before putting it into Inventory again. “I-It’s okay, okay? You know you’re my main weapon, right? N-No need to be so sad. I’ll definitely use you again soon, so don’t worry.”

Its last words before I let go of it were “Okay...see you soon.” Once it had disappeared fully into Inventory, I closed the rift in space. Then, I heaved out a quiet sigh. I was super happy—ecstatic, even—to have a front-row seat to watch my creation’s development. I was over the freakin’ moon, I tell ya. But there was one tiiny issue: it was super tricky to figure out how to deal with Zaien!



It could no longer remember when it became self-aware, nor did it know what the catalyst was. Perhaps it had always possessed a sense of self, or perhaps, for some reason, it had developed one somewhere along the way. No matter the case, it had somehow been endowed with its own ego, and with that, it had learned to perceive other things as well.

The very first things it felt were deep, mind-twisting resentment and shriek-inducing anger. A deluge of wrath and hatred that wanted nothing more than to consume everything in its path and destroy it. Its dreadful screams were so unbearable that merely touching it would tear apart a person’s spirit.

It keened endlessly as it attempted to push aside the darkness, but the flood of negative emotion didn’t stop flowing, instead drowning its consciousness entirely. No one heard its desperate cries for help. The maelstrom of despondency submerged it so completely that escape was an impossibility. But the horrors didn’t end there.

Were the one known as its master to hear its wails, those sounds only furthered the master’s own satisfaction. The master used that knowledge to absorb others’ screams to create more rage, more hatred, more fear. And so, new pockets of darkness expanded within it.

Engulfed by that ever-whirling eddy of fury and spite, it was ultimately thrust into a never-ending cycle of despair. Its existence fused with those dark waters, becoming one with them until, eventually, it felt nothing.

It wondered how much time had passed. By this point, its sense of self had mostly disappeared after its near-complete assimilation into the muddy pool of emotions. It frequently passed from one master to the next, yet nothing ever changed for it. The seething whirlpool of negativity's ceaseless desire to ruin and devour all would inevitably corrupt each of its masters' minds, sucking them into the void.

Over and over and over again, it had watched as every last person who wielded it succumbed to the black vortex. In their last moments, they morphed into the basest of beasts, their spirits broken. They exultantly savored the taste of the screams, both those from within and those from without. It was a series of events that had played out innumerable times.

Among its many masters, there had been those whose minds had been twisted before they had even laid their hands on it. Something all of them had in common, however, was that they were all wastrels who sought its power. A few were intoxicated by power—by exerting power over others—and forever sought to gain more of it so as to sate their hunger. A few were obsessed with spilling blood—with spilling ever more blood—and were unwilling to live without war so as to quench their thirst. *This master, too, will be the same.*

Forced to live every day within an ocean of despair it could not defy, it slowly closed its eyes in a vain attempt to surrender. But its new master was possessed of a disposition different from the rest. He wasn't swallowed up by the overwhelming waves of darkness. Instead, he used his tremendous power to subjugate its lament. There had been no other like him.

All who came before him had fallen prey to the dark, dark waters the moment they'd gripped it. Their minds controlled and souls stained by the void of negativity, they had been unable to release it until their deaths. They had all met their ends like this.

That didn't occur with this master. Despite being almost one with the darkness by now, when this master had ruthlessly subdued the rage and resentment that had tormented it for ages, it had felt some measure of relief. Then there were words the new master had spoken to it.

"You all belong to me now. As my property, you will keep your goddamn mouths shut, and I will use you however I damn well please. Then and only then will I give you the chance to be born again, free from the hell you're trapped in."

That was the first time it had ever felt something other than misery.

In the beginning, it was confused. Then, a great joy pierced through its whole being. It was a delight that couldn't be concealed.

The violent torrents of wrath and hate and fear and despair that had refused to die out within it—had vanished unnoticed. It suspected that when it had been given its new form, those sinister emotions had passed on to the places they belonged.

The power flowing from its master was unbelievably mighty. Yet at the same time, it was filled with a blissful, comforting warmth, as if wrapping it in rays of the sun. *Under this master, perhaps I can finally fulfill my duty.* It might no longer have to detest, reject, and ignore its reason for being. That thought made it tremble with joy.

It found its new master to be quite eccentric. Prior to him, it had only been used as a tool to absorb screams and bring about death. But its new master spoke to it, behaved lovingly toward it, and took meticulous care of it. He treated it like its own unique individual.

What made it the happiest was that this master had given it a name. It had stolen countless things from others, but it had never received anything from anyone. So each time its master called its name, it experienced a vivid delight in the deepest parts of its consciousness. And each time, that delight would blaze throughout its entire being.

Wielded by its master, it fought others for the sole purpose of protecting him. *I desire what my master desires, and I will do my part.* In that, it felt such ecstasy that nothing could interfere with the sensation. Since meeting this master, so many emotions it had never felt before had burst forth from it—fun, pleasure, and above all, a peculiar emotion that couldn't quite place, but that was so intense it almost made it writhe in agony. Even the loneliness it felt when separated from its master's hands had become dear to it.

Huh? Zaien, did you change?

You... Have you always been able to communicate this clearly?

"I'm doing what I always do."

That was how it responded to its master's questions one day. The same as it always did. The same as it always felt. It sensed that its thoughts had become a bit clearer than before, but the foundation of how it responded hadn't changed even after it had been given its new form. *My master. I want to protect my beloved master.*

Within its body, which had drawn copious amounts of blood, a single wish smoldered. It was an unattainable wish that it was unworthy of having granted, but nevertheless, that desire burned.

If it was allowed to wish...

If it was at all possible...

Forever. I want to be with you forever, my master. For all eternity...



A few days had passed since the day I'd made the discovery that my beloved sword, Zaien, had grown in unexpected ways. Right now, I was thinking about creating a sheath for it, and so I was sitting cross-legged in front of the table I used during my manufacturing process. On it were a bunch of different materials I'd collected in the Demonic Forest.

My sword was lying next to me in silence, its scarlet blade gleaming. It wasn't a very talkative weapon, but I could definitely feel that it was in a good mood. I figured it was happy to be with someone. *You're such a nice sword.*

Anyway, I had an idea. In my head, the reason—or at least part of the reason—it had developed was because it had defeated that horrendous manticore. Ever since then, I could telepathically understand its thoughts and emotions without the need to grab its hilt.

By the way, this was what Analysis showed me about Zaien's current stats.

Name: Zaien

Race: Magic Blade

Quality: Indeterminable

Power: 459

Stamina: 672

Harnessed Magic: 618

Special Abilities: Telepathy, Vampirism

Abilities: Crimson Flame 3, Self-Repair 1

Title: Intelligent Weapon, Demon Lord's Subordinate

A crimson katana-style greatsword created by Demon Lord Yuki. A sword of judgment that loathes sins and sinners alike. Due to its connection with Demon Lord Yuki, it possesses a distinct personality. As it consumes the blood of living creatures, it sharpens and develops ever further. When equipped, it amplifies the wielder's stats.

The way the interface showed the description was a whole lot different than it was when I used Analysis on normal items and equipment. That aside, what the heck was with its race being Magic Blade? How could Magic Blade be a race in the first place? *Well, Demon Lord is a race, I guess, so maybe it's not that weird for Magic Blade to be one too.*

As for its actual stat values, I had no idea if they were high or low for a weapon since I didn't have any basis for comparison. Plus, there was the "Harnessed Magic" category. Ignoring the fact that I wasn't

even sure what that meant, when in the world did my greatsword even *get* magic? In its current state, I could definitely feel magic emanating from it, but up until now, *I'd* had to pour *my* magic into it, so it shouldn't have possessed magic of its own.

Its abilities, especially its special abilities, weren't all that surprising to me considering what kind of weapon it used to be. I had no issues on that front. I did find it interesting that the sorcerous circuit I'd installed, Crimson Flame, was recognized as an ability in and of itself, though. And because it clearly had a level attached to it, I had to wonder if its power would increase the more I used it. *Curious. Very curious.*

The damn thing had even snuck in a Self-Repair pickup. Way to show up your own master, buddy. Seemed the way it worked was that it expended its magical stores to fix any nicks and dents it got. Maybe that was why it was so incredibly sturdy? I'd been going with it just being that awesome of a sword as the reason it never got scratched up no matter how rough I was with it, but now I realized that it had probably been repairing itself this whole time.

It was too much. All of this was just too much for my pea brain to understand. I didn't get a single part of it. Like, when exactly did it become my subordinate? Even disregarding the fact that I was the one who'd transformed it into its current form, none of this made any sense to me. I never could have predicted any of this.

Speaking of feeling like my world was being turned upside down, when I'd shown all this to Lefi a while back, her reaction had not disappointed. With a somewhat amazed expression, she'd gone, "Is that so? Well, boredom is certainly not a problem any of us will experience by your side." Seemed that a weapon acting so living thing-ish was a first for her too. She'd said that she knew Intelligent Weapons existed, but she'd never seen one that could so directly communicate what was on its mind.

You're amazing, you know that? I mean, even the legendary Supreme Dragon admitted it was her first time seeing something like my beloved greatsword. Anyway, yeah, Zaien had undergone all kinds of changes thus far. Now, you might be wondering what any of this information had to do with why I wanted to make a sheath for it, so let me break it down for ya. Ever since that day, whenever I would put Zaien back into Inventory, I could always and without fail feel its unbearable sadness at being separated from me.

I was sure that wasn't the person—er, "thing"? "Entity"? Fine, "it." I'd keep going with "it." I was sure *it* wasn't doing that on purpose, because it seemed to me like it didn't fully understand how Telepathy worked. But she...well, I didn't know if it even had a gender, but it had been feeling like a she lately. Anyway, her emotions

leaked out and conveyed themselves to me, probably unconsciously on her part.

To be honest, its behavior made me restless and agitated. I got a childlike impression from Zaien's personality, so whenever I sensed its sadness or loneliness, it made me feel like I had done something terrible, like I was the bad guy. And because I loved my weapon so much, I felt even guiltier anytime it was upset. I could imagine how awful it must be all alone inside Inventory, which was how I hit on the sheath idea. That way, I could keep it out here without putting the others in danger.

Back to the table in front of me with its locally sourced materials. Said materials consisted of parts from a few monsters I'd hunted recently and lumber I'd processed from trees I'd cut down. I didn't know which ones would be best for making a sheath, so I'd prepared a bunch so I could experiment.

I want to make it known that I wasn't particularly talented at this kind of thing. Like I'd done with all the other weapons I'd created thus far, I'd be utilizing my Weapon Enhancement ability on the sheath too. That was the extent of my crafting ability. "But a sheath isn't a weapon!" I hear you shout. To that, I say that I'd already made a few prototypes, so it was very doable. Okay, so there was a *bit* of a fine print attached to that in that technically—*technically*—I'd actually made *weapons* that *resembled* sheaths.

Weapon Enhancement was truly an all-purpose ability. For example, as long as there was a blade of some sort inside it, I could make things like umbrellas, canes, and even shoes. Think of, like a shoe with a blade that popped out when you clicked the heel. I'd even turned office supplies into concealed weapons. I'd made a few pens and mechanical pencils that would shoot out super-sharp needles when their specific triggers were pulled. They were so cool, and Lord knows I could never resist the cool factor when it came to literally anything. Of course, it would've been stupid dangerous to actually use those things for their original purposes on a daily basis, so I'd stuffed them all into Inventory.

Tangent aside, the gist of what I wanted to say was that I could basically make whatever I wanted with Weapon Enhancement as long as what I was making had some sort of weapon in it and I had the materials, magic, and imagination to bring it to life. *What an incredible ability, eh?*

"All right, it's done!"

My first *real* sheath. The woodworking wasn't what you'd call "great," but it was definitely a sheath. I wasn't used to making them, so I could be generous and cut myself some slack. As for the weapon part, that was all the way at the bottom, inside the scabbard's chape.

When you hit it, a blade would shoot out.

What I had *really* wanted to do was give it a mechanism where buckshot would fly out at the press of a button. RIP me, though, because I needed a rock-solid mental blueprint to pull off something that complicated. Without one, I was destined to fail. Not to mention that I didn't even know how to make the rounds. I'd run an analysis of my magic pistol, but hell if I could figure it out. Leila had said that it was out of her area of expertise too. I was fairly certain that there were no limits to what Weapon Enhancement could make; me and my lack of talent were the problem.

It's fine. When I had time on my hands again, I would experiment some more. And hey, what do you know, I was blessed with oceans of time—an eternity if I played my cards right.

I slipped Zaien into the trial sheath.

“...I don't like it.”

Seemed she...it... *Ah, screw it. She's a she.* I definitely got girl vibes from my sword, and *she* wasn't a fan of the scabbard. Mm, turned out I'd been a little off on the length, because the blade didn't fit all the way into the sheath's throat. The interior wasn't right either. It was way too roomy, so Zaien rattled around inside it whenever I moved it. *Okay, yeah, this is garbage.* No way, no how was this gonna work. On to the next.

After that, I made several more sheaths. I was having a hell of a time crafting *the one*. Zaien was being super nice to me, saying things like, “It's fine...” or “This one will work okay,” and while I appreciated her for it, she didn't realize that her true feelings were still slipping through. Those were telling me that she wasn't satisfied with any of the ones I'd made so far.

Hmmm... All right, girly, just bear with me a little longer. I finally had a strong vision of the perfect sheath for her, so I was sure I'd have it done soon. One thing I'd learned throughout my attempts was that my tastes and hers did not align. Like, at all. I'd produced a few super-cool, well-made scabbards like the kind from Creature Hunter, but she hadn't liked any of them. She just didn't seem to appreciate cool stuff the way I did.

Maaan... Well, she *was* a girl, after all, my Zaien. Although I still wasn't totally positive about that. But yeah, I could definitely see why she wouldn't like something that was based on my manly preferences. In other words, I needed to try to make something a girl would like. *Okay, course change, here goes.* With that, I grabbed the next set of materials and got to work on a new sheath.

Demon Lord's Special Scabbard: A bright red scabbard

created by Demon Lord Yuki for his weapon, Zaien. A blade is concealed within its chape. Durably constructed, it cannot be broken by lackadaisical attacks. Quality: A+.

I picked it up and inspected it thoroughly.

Hey, this just might work. It wasn't anything fancy, but you bet your ass it was hella well made. Better've been after all the practice I'd gotten from making the failures. One of the materials I'd used was a pinkish shell from a monster I'd defeated, and thanks to that, the whole scabbard was a lovely scarlet color a lot like Zaien's own crimson blade. That said, Zaien's hilt was made of regular old wood, so the color clashed a bit against it. *Oh, I know. I'll use some non-slip string to give it a grip wrap later. That'll make it a nice color.*

"Whaddya think, En?"

En was her new nickname. Got it from, well, the last two letters of her name. It just kinda felt wrong to keep calling her Zaien, y'know?

I asked her that after slipping her into it. She was quiet for a bit as she tried on this latest iteration, gathering her thoughts about how it fit. A few more moments and she gave me a response like she was nodding in agreement.

"It feels...so wonderful."

Ding ding ding! Ladies and gents, we have ourselves a winner. I could feel honest-to-goodness pleasure exuding from her. She was definitely a girl. She had to be since girls liked pink. I was glad this ended up being the right direction to go. The sheath's dimensions were spot-on too, with not a lick of empty space for her to jiggle around in.

What made me happiest was that she really, truly liked it. *I did a dang good job, huh? Go me.* I nodded my head all self-satisfied and murmured, "Yes, yes," to myself.

"Mwa ha ha! Wow, I can't believe I'm good enough to win over kids with my aesthetic too. I even scare *myself* sometimes with these skills that kill."

This demon lord was up for any challenge, up to and including understanding what children like. Another step forward on my journey to become the world's greatest creative demon lord.

"Is...something wrong?"

"Heh heh. Not at all, En. I'm just amazed by how limitless my genius is."

"Oh...I see."

Usually, one of our dungeon residents would've clapped back at my comment, but En's communication skills were still lacking. Although she seemed to understand that I was bouncing off the walls

with excitement, she didn't have anything in particular to say about it. Felt like she was having fun anyway, though. At least, that was the emotion I picked up from her.



"Ooooh! Your name's En? I'll call you EnEn! Nice to meet you!"

"Nice to meet you!"

"Okay... Nice to meet you too."

All smiles, Iluna and Shii chatted happily with a little girl roughly their height. The little girl herself was expressionless and spoke in a monotone, but I could tell by her aura that she was enjoying talking to the other two.

"Our opponents are three little girls. Let's send them to the Shadow Realm!"

"What?"

"Nothing. I said nothing."

Lefi stared at me with a confused look on her face after I reflexively shouted that. Naturally, I tried to play it off. Her expression cleared up pretty much immediately, and she got right back to scolding me while I sat in front of her seiza-style, forced into our customary punishment.

"That aside, who might that be? From where did you abduct that child?"

She pointed to the unfamiliar girl who was with Iluna and Shii. A red-and-black ribbon was tied at the sides of her lustrous, glossy black hair. Her slightly uneven bob cut just barely brushed the tops of her shoulders. Beneath that hair, I could see perfectly sculpted, doll-like, almost robotically neutral facial features. Her eyes were as dark as her hair and looked practically emotionless.

Her thin, pale body was draped in a bright red Japanese-style jinbei, except it had long sleeves like you'd find on a shrine maiden's dress. You know what? Let me correct myself. It would actually be better to say that her outfit looked exactly like a shrine maiden's, just completely red and with a shorter hakama. The little girl's overall vibe was very tastefully, traditionally Japanese. She was honestly really calming to look at; just one glance was enough to lull me to sleep.

"I didn't kidnap her! What the fuck?! Don't make me sound like a criminal!"

"Is that right? Then tell me who she is."

"She's...this."

While still groveling, I pointed at the weapon lying next to me—Zaien. The ribbon in the little girl's hair matched the string tied around Zaien's hilt.

"Its name is Zaien, yes?"

“Yes...”

My trial continued as Lefi the lawyer kept up her cross-examination. The two maids watched this scene play out, Lew giving a cheeky, “Oh, goody, here we go again,” while Leila just smiled her usual amused smile.

Speaking of Leila, for as composed as she was *now*, up until a few minutes ago, she’d been studying Zaien the sword and En the little girl super closely, mumbling, “Mm, yes, I see,” the whole time like some kind of mad scientist. She’d had an unhealthy amount of curiosity in her eyes, to the point that it had scared En so much that she’d hid behind me. Frankly, I’d been a bit afraid too.

Sheesh. That woman is way too good at hiding her real self. I just thought of something. What if the nonchalant vibe she always had going was just a disguise to cover up the insatiable appetite for knowledge burning inside her? That was...totally possible.

“Well, I will be the first to admit that strange things happen rather frequently. Moreover, I was aware that it was a unique Intelligent Weapon, but even so, when might it have acquired a substantiation ability?”

“Uh, about that... It just kinda happened when I tried it out on her.”

That was the reason Zaien now had a real body—En—and was hanging out with Iluna and Shii. I’d bought an Ability Scroll from the DP Catalog for an ability called Anthropomorphization and used it on her. As a reminder, a person could activate an Ability Scroll with their magic to transcribe the information in it into their brain, teaching them the ability.

I’d figured that, since Zaien had both a mind and magic of her own, why not test it out on her? If I was gonna keep her out of Inventory all the time, I thought it’d be nice if she had a body of her own. That’d make it a lot easier for her to be with everyone else here too. So pretty much on a whim, I’d pressed the scroll against sword-form En and *bam*, she was human-form En. Who’d a thunk it?

I felt like one of those overly doting parents who spoiled the crap out of their kid. Like, first, there was the sheath, and now this transformation thing... *Whatever. It’s fine.* Swords weren’t complete without sheaths, so no biggie on that front. Plus, I’d educated all my ladies on the best ways to avoid accidentally hurting themselves on swords, so everyone was on equal footing. *Yeah, totes fine.*

Oh, right. While we’re on the subject of Zaien’s little-girl form, I’d learned that even though she looked like one, she wasn’t actually a girl. She was a sword, and swords didn’t have genders because, well, they were swords. One of the first questions I’d asked was if she was a boy or a girl, and the response I’d gotten was, “Well...I’m neither.”

Then, she'd stripped naked to prove it to me, which was certainly a *decision*. Basically, just like Shii, she was fundamentally genderless.

It made sense in the grand scheme of things. Swords were inanimate objects. No duh there was nothing that made them either male or female.

But still, any way I sliced it, En was totally a girl. If you asked me to guess her gender, I would have to guess "girl." I mean, she looked like a girl, and her interests were girlish to boot. Plus, our family's almost-twinsies had been treating her like a girl since the moment they'd met her. En hadn't told us to stop calling her a her either, so there was no way we *wouldn't* all think of her as a little girl.

As far as En went, despite having, uh, *revealed* that she had a genderless body, she was most definitely using Anthropomorphization to present as a girl. That told me that she didn't particularly mind being thought of as a girl. In short, instead of a "he," we could consider En a "she."

In terms of the actual ability, right now, En couldn't stay in her human form for more than half a day. She couldn't move too far away from the sword itself either; being any more than a hundred meters from it was a no go. Also, it hadn't been that long since she'd acquired it, so the ability was still at level 1. Not that any of that was too surprising given the circumstances.

Because being in her human form drained her MP, I'd asked En to avoid transforming when we went monster hunting. I'd felt bad about it seeing as she finally had a body she could use, but she hadn't seemed to mind the request at all. In fact, after hemming and hawing for a bit, she had practically begged me to keep using her on my monster hunts. She had her pride as a weapon to look out for, after all. And honestly, I'd thought how earnest she'd been about sharing her wish even though she was majorly on the quiet side was super adorable.

If it had turned out that she hated doing her thing, I would've had to figure out another plan. Thankfully, though, there was no need to tax my brain cells with that possibility since the sword girl herself was gung-ho about her role. En would continue to be my primary weapon, end of story.

"Bah. You could not be content with the infants already being housed in this place, hm? No, you felt the need to add to their numbers by creating another one, I see. Alas, I am to blame as well. It was extremely shortsighted of me not to have recognized the depths of your *unfortunate inclination*."

"Let the record show that I firmly and vehemently disagree with that opinion. For real, though, can you stop making me sound like some depraved pervert?"

“Have no fear, my lord! We maids will continue to serve you no matter what kind of master you turn out to be!”

“Indeed, Master Demon Lord. Even if you possess some peculiar fetish...well, all I can say to that is that men will be men. We certainly wouldn’t *dream* of judging you for such a thing.”

“I’ve got *both* your numbers, you two-faced vixens. You pretend to be on my side and say shit that sounds supportive on the surface, but I know you’re both just dissing me underneath it all.”

How the heck could Leila say that about men anyway? I mean, she wasn’t wrong, but still. Every man most definitely had a fetish or two that was a little out of the ordinary—every man except for me, of course. I definitely didn’t get my rocks off to anything weird, thank you very much. I was a healthy, wholesome man who sure as shooting was *not* a pedo. Not even close.

I just liked thighs a liiittle more than most— Never mind. Forget I said anything.

“‘Dissing’?”

“It means you’re making fun of me or insulting me.”

“Ohhh, I see..... But we’re totally not?”

“And yet you took your sweet time saying that just now, didn’t ya?”

Gah! Damn insufferable maids. You too, Leila! Stop laughing and say something in my defense for once!

I glared threateningly at our family’s maids while still involuntarily sitting seiza-style thanks to Lefi’s unreasonable, irrational anger. At that moment, En came tottering over to me on her short, snow-white legs.

“You...cannot bully my master.”

She wrapped her arms tightly around my head and positioned herself in front of me like she was going to protect me with her tiny body. I could smell the gentle, sweet smell and feel the high body heat that were characteristic of little girls.

Yeah! You tell ‘em, En! Defend me from this absurd, oppressive world!

“No, no, EnEn! We’re not bullying Yukiki!”

Uh-oh. My reinforcement had been ambushed by a new and terrifying power. This would be her toughest battle yet.

“Truly...?”

“Uh, Miss Iluna, please—”

The still-expressionless En tilted her head questioningly at Iluna, who bounded toward us, beaming like usual.

“Uh-huh! This is normal! Yukiki and Lady Lefifi always do that to each other. It’s how they like to play and have fun with each other! So you can just ignore them!”

“I see... All right, then.”

“Uh, Miss En, please—”

Easily persuaded by our family’s golden-haired, energetic little princess, En left my side. Iluna took her back to Shii and the trio’s happy fun time.

Noooo! She mutinied so quickly! But wait a sec. Goddamn, Iluna’s mean!

“Hmph. You no longer have any allies, Yuki.”

“Grrr... I don’t accept this! I *won’t* accept this! I refuse to yield to such tyranny! I shall protect myself with my own two hands!”

Fired up, I got off my knees and onto my feet.

“You dare defy me?!”

“Wrong! It would only be defiance if a true wrongdoer refused to admit their wrongs in their arrogance! And I have done nothing wrong! Therefore, your choice of words is inappropriate!”

Objection! I thrust my finger at Lefi like I was that lawyer from the video game series. Also just like him, I responded with an absolutely perfect rebuttal. *Victory is mine!*

“Hrnh! That is pure sophistry and I will not stand for it! Fine! Since you refuse to reflect on your actions and repent, I will do as you wish and beat those words into your very bones! I challenge you, Yuki! The usual terms!”

“How foolish you are, Lefi! Tell me, for all the times we’ve repeated this tiresome pattern, how many times have I lost?!”

“Ha! Spout your drivel while you have the chance! As the winner of our last game, I exercise my right to select Lew and Leila as my comrades. You will fight against the three of us accordingly!”

“Wh-Whaaat?!”

The last game we’d played was the memory game. In rare form, Lefi had been on a hot streak, matching pairs one after another, so I had definitely lost, but I didn’t think it would come back to bite me in the ass now!

“Huh? We’re in on this too?”

“Heh heh heh. I think we’ll quite enjoy ourselves, Lew.”

Lew was a blockhead, so I didn’t think of her as a serious contender. Leila, on the other hand, was a different beast entirely. Beneath that smiling, spacey persona was a mind like a steel trap. *Back to my tinfoil hat theory about her being sneaky like that.*

Anyway, my win-loss record for board games I’d played against Leila leaned heavily to the “loss” side.

“Hah. Have it your way. Victory in the face of adversity is exactly what it means to be a demon lord! If you three think you can defeat me, I’ll break that illusion!”

Once I shouted out a certain unlucky high school student’s catchphrase, I prepared the area for our match. Okay, fine, it wasn’t

that serious. I put the pieces on the board. Happy? But then! Then, we dove headfirst into a world of war, caught up in tricks and intrigue.

With all the commotion happening in the dungeon, no one noticed until all was said and done that En had a tiny smile on her face.

Epilogue: Two Dragons

An extraordinarily large temple was built inside a cavern. The walls, ceiling, and floor were all bare rock. Several rough pillars, created by nature itself, supported the ceiling. Thick ropes resembling holy ones used to guard sacred spaces wound around and between those pillars, and the light dancing in the air dimly illuminated the area. Within the deepest part of this temple, rising a step above the floor, lay a smaller wooden sanctuary. Enshrined within it was an extraordinarily old dragon.

“Why have you come, Gyuohga?” Perhaps awoken from its slumber, the aging dragon levered itself up and faced the black-scaled dragon. Though its voice was quiet, it spoke with unwavering authority. “You are not allowed to enter this place. What is your purpose?”

“Dragon King, why do you remain here?”

“You step into a forbidden realm to ask me such an inconsequential question?”

The black dragon quailed for an instant, captured by the penetrating, electrifying gaze of the old dragon—the Dragon King. But the black dragon recovered its self-assured expression before responding.

“I want to know. I want to know why, despite possessing the power to control the entire world, you refuse to leave this cave. I want to know why none of us do the same. If we were to leave here, commanding all who dwell out there would be an effortless task! So why does not a single dragon in our village seek to do as much?!”

The Dragon King replied after contemplating the black dragon’s question in silence for some time.

“Bah. A whelp like you, who has yet to stray from your mother’s teat, would bay at me? Then I shall grant your wish and answer. What do we stand to gain from going to such trouble?”

“What do you...?”

As the black dragon looked on in confusion at the unexpected retort, the Dragon King continued his rebuke dispassionately.

“If we are to engage in pointless activities, it is much better to spend our days bathing in the sun’s celestial light, thriving off the land’s blessings. You are still young. Very, very young. That is why you speak so foolishly.”

“You would call me a fool? Me, the one who will lead the next generation of dragons?!”

“Your very anger is a hallmark of the young, whelp. You were born as one of dragonkind and elevated to power by other youngsters like you, so that you have grown impudent is not unexpected. But know that the world is vast. So vast that even you cannot imagine its breadth.”

“It is a world that is ultimately interwoven by races inferior to us!”

The black dragon was enraged as a result of the Dragon King treating him like a child.

“Hmph. Then live as you please. If you would choose to cocoon yourself in the comfort of that wretched ignorance, then surely you will find peace. I have nothing more to say to you. Never again are you to enter my domain.”

His verdict handed down, the Dragon King once more laid down, closing his eyes—when fangs struck! Though he tried to evade them, he failed to do so completely because he had been taken completely by surprise. The attack landed, and it was tearing his windpipe to shreds.

“Graaaaawwwrrrrr!!! What is the meaning of this, Gyuohga?!”

As blood sprayed from his neck, the Dragon King twisted his enormous body away and swung his incredibly thick, tree trunk-like tail at his opponent. With the Dragon King’s blood dripping from his mouth, the black dragon was thrown backward by the heavy attack.

“Ngh... Hah! Gah ha ha ha! How you have aged, Dragon King! Is this all that your strength amounts to now? Tell me, how does it feel to have suffered a fatal wound from a whelp you held in contempt?!”

He had rolled several times, knocking down a few of the temple’s pillars in his destructive journey, but the black dragon stood up once more. Despite enduring a fair amount of damage, he smiled savagely before roaring his next words.

“You were born as one of dragonkind, yet you have lost your ambition, useless graybeard! I will lead the dragons in your place! Die in peace!”

The Dragon King’s face twisted in fury, but he discerned that his life was slipping away. Gradually, his expression calmed with that epiphany. While breathing raspily from a throat that was mostly crushed, he continued speaking.

“Hngh... Bah. Yes, indeed. It is true that I am old. I have none but myself to blame for not seeing that you came here clearly intending to do exactly this. In my prime, that one blow would have been more than sufficient to kill you.”

“Enough of your infernal prattling! Breathe your last, you relic of

ages gone by!”

The Dragon King spewed profuse amounts of blood. Despite that, he grinned sardonically as if everything was clear to him. Then, he again captured the black dragon in his intense gaze.

“Why... Why are you smiling?!”

“Heh heh... All creation passes into nothingness. Now, a new path has opened. So be it. Show me how far a shortsighted fool such as you can carry your lofty ambition. I will place a wager with my brethren in the heavens, and we will watch you—”

Heaving out those final words, the Dragon King slowly closed his eyes. His blood stained the shrine floors red, permeating the area with its iron stench.

“Hah. Hah hah hah... Now, *I’m* the Dragon King! Gah ha ha ha!”

Standing before his foe’s corpse, the black dragon let out a howl that echoed ceaselessly.

Special Story: The World through Her Eyes

The world was a relentlessly cruel place. That was her only thought.

Killing people, consuming their blood, terrorizing them. Wails and screams. A cycle that never ended no matter how strongly she wished it to. A world painted only in the colors of despair. Unable to embrace her own nature, she did not know why she even existed. Washed away by the river of darkness, she continued to drown as time crept ever forward. Her soul cried out. She sensed her very being slowly, steadily crumbling away.

But then, having survived in such a world for so long, she met a new master.

“EnEn! Hey, EnEn! What kinda stuff do you like?”

“...‘Like’?”

En cocked her head. The lack of expression on her face made it extremely difficult to read her thoughts.

“Yeah, I wanna know what you like! Do you like to take naps? Do you like to relax? Hmm, I don’t think anyone in the whole wide world likes to relax as much as Lady Lefifi, though. Oh, and I know you like Yukiki, but I wanna know what other things you like besides him.”

En stared blankly and said nothing as she digested the other girl’s words. Finally, something seemed to come to mind, and she spoke in a voice reminiscent of the lovely tinkling of a bell.

“I...like moving my body.”

“Ooooh, you do?! That’s nice! I like that a lot too! When I move around a lot and sweat a lot then take a nice hot bath, I sleep sooo good!”

“...Yes. It’s nice.”

Though she didn’t say much, En still participated in the conversation—mostly because Iluna looked to be enjoying their talk.

What Iluna didn’t know was the true meaning of En’s “moving my body” statement: being wielded by her master, cutting down their enemies, and accomplishing her long-held desire to fulfill her duty as a sword. Blissfully unaware of all that, Iluna continued to chat with the girl in Japanese attire.

“What else do you like, EnEn?”

“What...else...”

That question made En contemplate in an even longer silence than before. This time, however, she shook her head.

“...I can’t think of anything.”

“Huh? Mmm, weell... I know! Let’s figure it out together!”

“...Hm? ‘Figure it out’?”

“Uh-huh! The more things you like and have fun with, the better life is! So let’s find lots and lots together!”

Beaming, Iluna demonstrated what she meant by curling herself into a small ball, then stretching her body out dramatically when she said “lots and lots.”

“What...is this?”

“It’s a cat’s cradle!”

“...‘Cat’s cradle’?”

“Uh-huh! If you wind it like this, then this, you can make it look like all kinds of stuff!”

“Ohhh...”

Iluna skillfully manipulated the string between her fingers, creating different shapes with it. Watching her, En let out a small cheer. Then, she turned toward the little girl next to Iluna—Shii—and spoke softly to her.

“It’s...entangled.”

“Tee hee hee! Yup!”

Despite taking on her human form, Shii’s body was still composed of a fluid-like material. The string wrapped around her fingers was sinking into her, creating an amazing visual spectacle. But Shii was quite adept at twisting the string into various shapes too. She even used the parts of the string lodged within her body, though En couldn’t figure out how she did it.

“Amazing... So that’s a cat’s cradle.”

“No, EnEn, that’s not how you play the cat’s cradle game.”

“...Hm? It’s not?”

En tilted her head, indicating her puzzlement. The usually grinning Iluna giggled ruefully for once, then proceeded to correct the other girl’s misunderstanding.

“Shii’s the only one who can do what she did! Cat’s cradle is a little more normal than that, though, like how I did it. But still, Shii’s game is amazing too!”

“Shii amazing!”

“Yes...you are.”

Shii puffed out her chest proudly and En clapped her hands, praising the other girl. Suddenly realizing she was now surrounded by

not one but two airheads, Iluna thought to herself, *Uh-oh. This is gonna be tough.*

“...What is this black-and-white thing?”

“Othello! It’s a fun board game!”

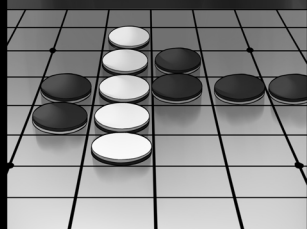
Iluna explained the game’s rules to En.

“Okay... It seems interesting.”

“Then let’s play right now!”

Iluna and En sat across from each other and began their match.

Shii sat next to them, a huge smile on her face as she spectated.



“Hmph! EnEn, you’re good at this!”

“...So are you, Iluna.”

The board was split evenly between the two. Actually, it was slightly in Iluna’s favor. But En was nowhere near beaten. She went on to capture more of Iluna’s pieces, adding more of her color to the board. No one would have ever thought this was her first time playing Othello. When the battle finally ended, though victory had gone to Iluna, the number of each color of tile on the board was so close to being equal that it was hard to tell which side had more without a thorough count.

“You’re amazing, EnEn! I can’t believe that was your first time!”

“But...you were stronger, Iluna.”

“Nuh-uh! I’ve just played Othello lots! You’re the amazing one since it was your first game!”

The two girls insisted on complimenting each other for a few more minutes. A voice then interrupted their back-and-forth.

“Hmm. I see you are indulging in an interesting bit of entertainment.”

It was Lefi. Considering her somewhat messy hair, she had likely just woken up from a nap.

“Lady Lefifi! You have bedhead!”

“Ah. And now?”

“No! Not good. I fix it for you!”

Lefi sat down cross-legged with them. While letting Shii fuss with her hair, she folded her arms and spoke to Iluna and En.

“Heh heh heh. Oh-thel-low, I see. I shall be your next opponent. Come! Which of you shall take me on?! Who amongst you believes they are able to defeat me?!”

“Boo! Lady Lefifi, you stink at board games!”

“H-How rude! I most certainly do not!”

Smacked cleanly over the head with the truth by the little girl, the dragon girl blurted out the only rebuttal she could think of.

“Pffft!”

Yuki burst out laughing. He was doing something of his own nearby but had been listening in on their conversation.

“Ahem! Disregard such things! I find that I have some free time, so you *will* play with me!”

“Grr... Bah! It is bad enough that I lost to Iluna, but to have my humiliation compounded by losing to a novice such as En...!”

“It’s ’cause you stink, Lady Lefifi!”

“You stink!”

“Yes...you stink.”

“Th-That may be so when I am up against Iluna and En, but Shii, you are no less amateurish than I!”

“Uh-huh! That’s right!”

“Hmph. As long as you admit it...”

Lefi was forced into silence. She couldn’t very well be angry at Shii when she acknowledged her shortcomings with such a bright smile. It took the wind right out of her sails.

“Heh heh. Turned out just like I expected. Yo, Supreme Dragon. Dontcha feel pathetic for losing so hard?”

“Hi, Yukiki!”

Iluna greeted him delightedly when he walked over to them.

“Grr... I would like to see *you* best them! I will have you know that they are quite formidable opponents!”

“Oh, reeeally? Then seeing as she stomped the Supreme Dragon’s ass right into the dirt, I *definitely* wanna go up against En first.”

“Okay... I accept.”

This time, the match between En and Yuki began.

“Wh-What in the...? Huh? Wait, this ain’t right. My chips. Where are my chips? I barely see my color on the board.”

“You stink too, Yukiki!”

“Master stink too!”

“Well, well, well. Whatever is the matter, Yuki? I cannot quite recall your words from earlier. Might you help me remember?”

“Grr... You’ve got a lotta nerve getting on your high horse! Especially when you didn’t even win!”

“I do not dispute your words, but these are two wholly different matters. Can you comprehend my elation at seeing that arrogant smirk disappear from your tiresome face now that you are losing?”

“Keep talking, Lefi! Keep! Talking! You know *damn* well that you’ve hardly ever won a game against me!”

Right when Yuki and Lefi’s usual farce was about to commence, Leila and Lew called out from the kitchen.

“Dinner’s ready, everyone!”

“Come get the delicious, scrumptious dinner cooked by Mama Leila!”

“We’ll be finished setting the table in about five minutes, so make sure you’re here by then. Oh, and Lew, no dinner for you.”

“Wh-What?! Why?!”

“Hm...food. Food... All right, Lefi, I propose a truce. My stomach comes first.”

“Hmph. Fine. I concur, for food is justice. Come, lasses, it is time to eat.”

“Kaaay!”

Iluna and Shii squealed in sync.

“EnEn, it’s dinner time! I’ll show you more stuff tomorrow, so let’s go eat!”

“...Okay.”

With Iluna holding her hand, En headed to the table where everyone else was waiting.



The world was a relentlessly cruel place. That was her only thought. Or rather, it was *once* her only thought. And while she acknowledged that unbearable pain, cruelty, and irrationality were a part of life, they were only one aspect of it. There was more to the world than just that.

There were so many more sides to the world, so many more colors, and so much more in it. She knew now that there was so much more she had yet to see and so many more things she had yet to experience. Not just in the world around her, but within herself as well. If she stayed here, she knew she would learn so much more about what life had to offer.

The world is relentlessly cruel...and warm.

That was what she thought.

“Hmm? EnEn, you look like you’re having fun!”

Iluna cocked her head, puzzled. The noisy dinner table reflected in En’s eyes.

“Miss Leila! This is yummy!”

“Heh heh, I’m quite glad to hear that.”

“I know I’ve said it before, but I still think it’s amazing that my lord and Lady Lefi can eat so skillfully with their pair of sticks.”

“Tis but a matter of diligent practice, Lew. Once you learn how to use this eating utensil, you will understand the convenience it provides.”

“Okay, I gotta admit, you learned how to use chopsticks really fast, Lefi. Hey, Iluna, En, what’s wrong?”

Iluna responded with, “Nothing! Nothing at all!” and En agreed with a wordless nod. Then, the kimono-clad little girl turned to Iluna so that she could reply to her initial comment.

“Well...I’m looking forward to tomorrow.”

“Tee hee! So that’s why! I’m excited too! Let’s play lots again!”

En responded to Iluna’s delighted smile with a single nod that conveyed her own happiness.

Afterword

Hello, everyone. I'm the author of this work, Ryuyu. Thank you so much for buying volume 3!

I can't believe we're already three volumes in. Three! Crazy, right?

As far as the story goes, the distance between Lefi and Yuki has shortened a great deal. One or two steps more and they're there. At least that's how I feel, at least, though I'm sure they'll still fight over the dumbest things every day no matter how deep their bond grows. I can definitely see that in their future, ha ha. You see, for them, arguing is an important method of communication. I, too, am looking forward to whatever silly topics they'll quarrel over as we move forward.

I apologize for such a short afterword, but I'd like to end this with acknowledgments. First, many thanks to my editor, who patiently corrected the many mistakes in my script. Second, thank you to Daburyu for drawing such wonderful illustrations. They brought a smile to my face. Third, I'd like to thank Note Tono for drawing the warm, comforting comic version. And finally, my thanks to everyone else involved in this production.

Lastly, to all the readers who purchased this book, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I hope you're all excited to see how Yuki and Lefi's relationship develops from here on out!

Ryuyu

All right, listen up. The world is huge. One world stretches out infinitely in a novel. And just by reading, a person expands their own world too. I hope that my book becomes at least one part of a reader's world.



The Young Man
Reborn in Another World
as a Demon Lord

This panel is divided into three horizontal sections. The top section features a close-up of a young man with black hair and red eyes, looking surprised. The middle section features a young man with brown hair in a purple military-style uniform, looking forward with a surprised expression. The bottom section features a young woman with dark hair and a red scarf, looking up with a concerned expression. The background is a soft, purple-hued light.

Yuki

"What the...?
This mother—"

Now I'm a
DEMON LORD!
Happily Ever After with
Monster Girls
in My **DUNGEON**

3

Crown Prince of Alisia
Lute Glorio Alisia

A serious young man, but...

"They're
traitors!
Seize
them!"

"Something
feels
wrong..."

Hero
Nell

Ancient Dragon
Lefisios
(Pet Name: Lefi)

"Behold!
I've invited
a most
esteemed
professor
to be our
advisor!"

Werewolf
Lewin
(Pet Name: Lew)

"I beg
your
pardon?"

Healing Slime
Shii
(Human Form)

"Hm?
Then I
dunno!"

"Ahem!"

"Must I
wear these
whiskers and
corrective
lenses?"

Of the
Ovine Race
Leila

Vampire
Iluna



"I, uh...
I couldn't
let you two
outdo me,
you know?"

"Hmph.
Filth. You're
not worth
staining my
sword on."

Commander of
the Holy Knights

**Carlotta
Demeyere**

A holy knight of the Church.
Nell's de facto guardian.

"Then,
Mr. Heroic
Dee-min
Lord, will
you carry
me off?"

Princess of Alisia

Ilyr

Attached to Yuki
after he saved her
from the brink of death.



"You...
cannot
bully my
master."

Weapon

Zaien has
evolved!

Yuki's Weapon

Zaien

(Pet Name:
En)

Now has a human form thanks to
the Anthropomorphization ability.

Taciturn and inexpressive,
but loves Yuki very much.

Now I'm a
DEMON LORD!
Happily Ever After with
Monster Girls
in My **DUNGEON**

3

Author: Ryuyu

Illustrator: Daburyu





The Young Man
Reborn in Another World
as a Demon Lord

This panel is divided into three horizontal sections. The top section features a close-up of Yuki, a young man with long black hair and red eyes, looking surprised. The middle section features Lute Glorio Alisia, a young man with brown hair in a purple military-style uniform, pointing forward with a surprised expression. The bottom section features Hero Nell, a young woman with short dark hair and a red scarf, looking concerned. The background is a soft, out-of-focus purple and white.

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Now I'm a Demon Lord! Happily Ever After with Monster Girls in
My Dungeon: Volume 3
by Ryuyu

Translated by Kashi Kamitoma
Edited by Adam Haffen

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MAO NI NATTANODE, DUNGEON TSUKUTTE JINGAI MUSUME
TO HONOBONO SURU Vol. 3

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